Sea Trial

Fleming 55

BY GEORGE SASS, SR.

It's a work of art that's not yet finished," is how an employee of Burr Yacht Sales described the Fleming 55, which—along with the larger Fleming 65 and 75 — is the only boat this company sells and services.

I spent time at the Burr facility near Annapolis to learn how this motoryacht, originally introduced in the 1980s, could still be considered a "new" boat and why its sales have continued to grow, year after year.

To begin with, the Fleming 55 has the lines of a true classic. It's one of those rare, timeless designs that look just right. While today's 55 strongly resembles the 52 it replaced, this is essentially an entirely different boat that has evolved because the builder has made improvements and added new features to each and every hull number. It is estimated that each new Fleming incorporates an average of six to eight refinements — some big, some small.

Since a buyer has to wait nearly two years to take delivery of a new Fleming 55 after ordering one, these improvements are made on a continuous basis while the boat is under construction. New owners, therefore, are pleasantly surprised to find they have a "new, improved" version when the boat arrives.

The fundamental source of these evolutionary changes is none other than Tony Fleming, who continues to guide his company and provide personal feedback based on extensive cruising experience aboard his own Fleming. Tony is also known to hop on board his customers' yachts and join them on an adventure halfway around the world.

That said, judging from the active involvement of Fleming owners, many of these new ideas come from buyers themselves. The nearly 200 Fleming 55s cruising throughout the world provide a treasure chest of valuable feedback.

Several things make this boat stand out from others, and the key ones are performance related. As soon as you start the engines, you're struck by the 55's uncanny quietness. Leaving the dock at idle speed, I had to look at the electronic tachometers to make sure the 500-hp Cummins diesels were actually running.

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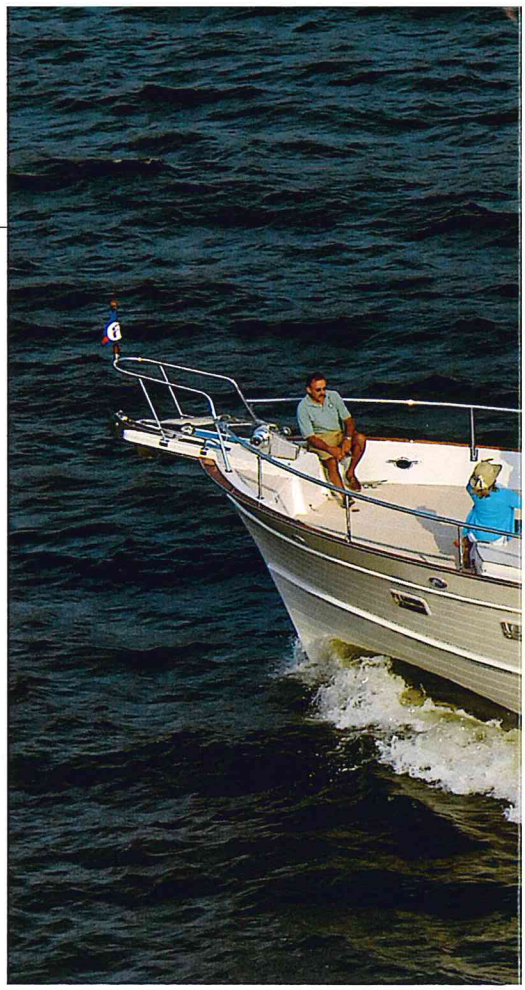
The secret to the vessel's quietness starts with its robust, solid construction and with the obsessive attention Fleming pays to soundproofing. One of the heroes here is the AquaDrive anti-vibration system — an expensive but effective method for dampening vibration, which is the source of most boat noise.

By isolating the engine, transmission and shaft from the boat's structure, the system minimizes noise from each diesel, drivetrain and propeller. (For more details, check out www.aquadrive.com)

Fleming also takes a unique approach to engine-room air vents. Instead of locating them on the outside of the cabin sides or hull, there's a clever, hidden vent system under the coaming in the cockpit, so very little engine-room noise reaches the area of the main cabin or pilothouse. An added benefit is that no salt mist gets into the engine room.

When we were running at 10 knots with all outside doors closed, the sound level in the pilothouse was a very quiet 60 dB, making the Fleming 55 one of the quietest boats I've tested. At a high cruising speed of 17 knots and 2,400 rpm, the level was still a very low 66 dB. In the main saloon, which is directly over the engine room, the sound level was a modest 70 dB at high cruise.



The looks of the Fleming 55 virtually define the terms classic and timeless. Its relatively low profile is unusual among motoryachts these days, as is the very large, open cockpit. The interior (lower left) is beautifully finished, and the inside helm (right) is thoughtfully laid out.

Fleming's semi-displacement hull offers the operator a choice of high efficiency or relatively high speed. The hull rides beautifully between 9 and 10 knots, burning only 10 gph while running at 1,450 rpm. This is definitely the 55's sweet spot for comfort and fuel efficiency. For more speed, it's best to give her a lot of throttle to get her up over the hump and push her nose down. She seems very happy at 17 knots, where the twin Cummins burn 40 gph — not bad for 68,000 pounds of pure luxury. Top speed was just under 20 knots with loads of 75 percent fuel and 50 percent water.

The luxuriously appointed interior features three staterooms, two heads, a gorgeously appointed main saloon, a full-sized galley with a stand-up refrigerator (cleverly hidden behind matching teak doors) and a pilothouse big enough for a settee, a small table, a Stidd helm chair and a swiveling navigator's chair. The fully instrumented flying bridge is reached by a stairway from the inside of the pilothouse.

One of the most recent and worthwhile refinements is the addition of an upper-level, aft control station that includes both throttle and thruster controls. Here you have a clear view of the stern and can still see where the bow is, so backing this limo into a tight spot is a piece of cake.

One of my pet peeves with big cruisers incorporating several fuel tanks is their confusing fuel-management systems. Fleming's setup should be called "Fuel Management for Dummies," because it's virtually impossible to make a mistake when switching tanks. A central manifold system is clearly marked and prevents overfilling a tank with unspent fuel from the engines.

One of the recent refinements I like best are the mirrored surfaces on the outboard sides of the Cummins diesels. While we were underway, I could inspect both sides of each engine without climbing over rotating shafts or hot exhaust manifolds. I call this kind of idea a "BGO," or a "Blinding Glimpse of the Obvious." Fleming's unending development of its classic 55 is full of them.

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA: 55' 9"
Beam: 16'
Draft: 5'
Displacement: 68,000 lbs.
Fuel Capacity: 1,000 gals.
Power: Twin Cummins 500-hp diesels
Price (base): $1.45 million
Information: 949-645-1024
www.flemingyachts.com