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**BOATING
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GRADY-WHITE 281 COASTAL EXPLORER

Grady's most recent Coastal Explorer model will be right at home whether seeking back-bay tarpon or offshore tuna.



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Fishing boats have to be more than casting platforms, livewells and fish boxes. Today's boating family doesn't confine itself to inshore or offshore fishing. In fact, they might decide they don't want to fish at all on any given boating Saturday. That's what Grady-White had in mind when it designed its first Coastal Explorer, the 251 CE, nearly 10 years ago. It's been so successful, we wondered why Grady-White waited so long to bring out the larger 281.

The 281 CE is 27 feet, 7 inches in length with a 9-foot-4-inch beam and designed to run nicely on a single Yamaha XTO 450 or dual 300s. Our test boat sported the latter (an

PHOTO: BILL DOSTER

upgrade with full maneuverability), and it's exactly how we'd equip it. Here's why: First, there is the redundancy factor; if one engine goes down, there's a second to get you home. Second, with dual engines you get joystick maneuvering and all the FishPoint and StayPoint features. And when equipped with full maneuverability, Yamaha's engines provide an autopilot experience that is hard to beat. Garmin's system with GN+ charting and Yamaha engines make it easy to set an auto route for a complicated

PHOTOS: COURTESY GRADY-WHITE BOATS

course between two points. It is so sophisticated, it will decelerate, stop and engage StayPoint right over the waypoint, holding the boat in place while anglers ready the lines. Single and dual setups both reward the owner with top speeds that exceed 50 mph.

Once the 281 gets you offshore, dual shotgun rod holders and dual gunwale rod holders hold your quiver of sticks. Two shotgun rod holders double as stanchion sockets for the optional seat-back. There are a pair of rod holders forward as well, should you

choose to use them. The hardtop is built and reinforced to accept outriggers. Four rocket launchers on the hardtop and four in the back of the standard lean bar—or an optional elite leaning post with fully adjustable luxury seats with bolsters and armrests—keep other rods handy, and both add a 38-gallon livewell, rigging sink and pullout shower. We found convenient tackle compartments in the front and back of the leaning post.

The fish boxes are under the forward seating and drain overboard. The second (18-gallon) livewell in the aft platform can double as another fish box, but we see inshore anglers using it for crabs or shrimp. Lastly, if you really plan to load the boat, there's a double forward lounge with an insulated storage box beneath. Like every other compartment, it drains overboard.

The 281 Coastal Explorer converts quickly from an inshore tarpon chaser with spacious casting decks to an open deck center-console by stowing fiberglass casting-deck inserts.

The cockpit is roomy for a crossover, whether you want to cruise and snorkel or haul in a trophy fish. For an inshore day, the aft cockpit offers a casting deck. The convertible port and starboard seatbacks swing outward to create leaning bolsters to add stability when casting. The optional center seatback cushion can be removed and stowed. The foredeck offers vast casting space by joining the forward lounge (cushions removed) with the optional forward casting deck using a half-moon-shaped removable deck insert.

These casting platforms double as luxury seating through well-designed, lushly upholstered, thickly padded cushions. On the forward deck, an electric switch actuates two inclining seatbacks. With the cocktail table flat in the casting deck, the cushions complete a sun pad. Then the optional half-moon-shaped insert and cushion join the forward console lounge for a stem-to-console sun pad. Getting to the foredeck



is easy thanks to molded-in steps port and starboard. The aft deck also provides port-to-starboard seating with a removable center seatback posted in rod holders and cushions that run beam to beam with the swiveling seatbacks in a comfortable position for riding.

Grady optionally pre-rigs for a 36-volt trolling motor with a swivel bracket, a motor shaft support and three 12-volt batteries. Your dealer will add the Minn Kota or Rhodan trolling motor and dual 10-foot Power-Poles—get those, you'll want them whether tarpon fishing or fishing in the backcountry.

The 281 CE is as well-appointed for watersports as it is for luxury cruising or fishing. We liked the electrically activated side door that opens downward, offering a platform just above the water for easy reboarding from a swim. If you ship water while its open, it quickly scuppers overboard.

Grady-White boats are often accused of being heavy, but the 281 CE's SeaV2 hull rides solid and weighs about 1,000 pounds less than the Everglades 273cc (similarly equipped). Everglades is a formidable opponent and offers an upper-station option. That's not Grady's style, or it would have brought one along on this boat.

What Grady-White's style is, though, is impeccable construction, beautiful lines and a track record of winning customer-satisfaction awards. —Randy Vance

High Points

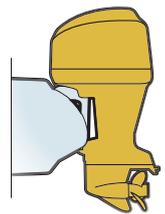
- ▶ Fast and responsive, quick to plane, and smooth in chop.
- ▶ Dual livewells (main 38 gallons; aft deck 18 gallons) offer plenty of bait capacity.
- ▶ Center-console compartment and entry are generously proportioned for easy entry.
- ▶ Wraparound acrylic windshield offers excellent visibility and has a hard-shell coating, enabling wiper use without marring clarity.
- ▶ Comfortable, convertible seating stows away conveniently for fishing.

Low Points

- ▶ We'd like to see removable mounts for the swiveling aft seatbacks.
- ▶ Bilge access is limited, but the trademark Grady seacock handles are easily reachable.

• LOA: 27'7" • BEAM: 9'4" • DRAFT (MAX): 17" (engines up) • DISPLACEMENT (APPROX.): 5,650 lb. (w/o engines) • TRANSOM DEADRISE: 16 degrees • BRIDGE CLEARANCE: 7'11" • FUEL CAPACITY: 160 gal. • MAX HORSEPOWER: 600 • AVAILABLE POWER: Yamaha outboards

AVAILABLE POWER:
OUTBOARD



HOW WE TESTED

ENGINES: Dual Yamaha 300s PROPS: SWS II 15.25" x 19" 3-blade stainless steel GEAR RATIO: 1.75:1 FUEL LOAD: 150 gal. WATER ON BOARD: 0 gal. CREW WEIGHT: 400 lb.

GRADY-WHITE BOATS

Greenville, North Carolina; 252-752-2111; gradywhite.com



**BOATING
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RESULTS**

rpm	SPEED			EFFICIENCY				OPERATION	
	knots	mph	gph	naut. mpg	stat. mpg	n. mi. range	s. mi. range	angle	sound level
1000	5.4	6.3	2.7	2.0	2.3	289.7	333.3	0	65
1500	7.5	8.6	4.5	1.7	1.9	239.1	275.2	1	70
2000	9.1	10.5	7.3	1.2	1.4	180.0	207.1	3	74
2500	15.3	17.7	10.0	1.5	1.8	220.9	254.2	4	78
3000	24.2	27.9	12.2	2.0	2.3	285.7	328.7	4	81
3500	29.4	33.8	15.8	1.9	2.1	267.7	308.1	3	83
4000	34.2	39.4	22.3	1.5	1.8	221.1	254.4	2	84
4500	38.0	43.7	28.6	1.3	1.5	191.2	220.0	2	86
5000	42.2	48.6	36.5	1.2	1.3	166.6	191.7	1	88
5500	46.4	53.5	47.1	1.0	1.1	142.0	163.4	1	89
5950	50.0	57.5	53.8	0.9	1.1	133.7	153.9	1	90

MOST ECONOMICAL CRUISING SPEED