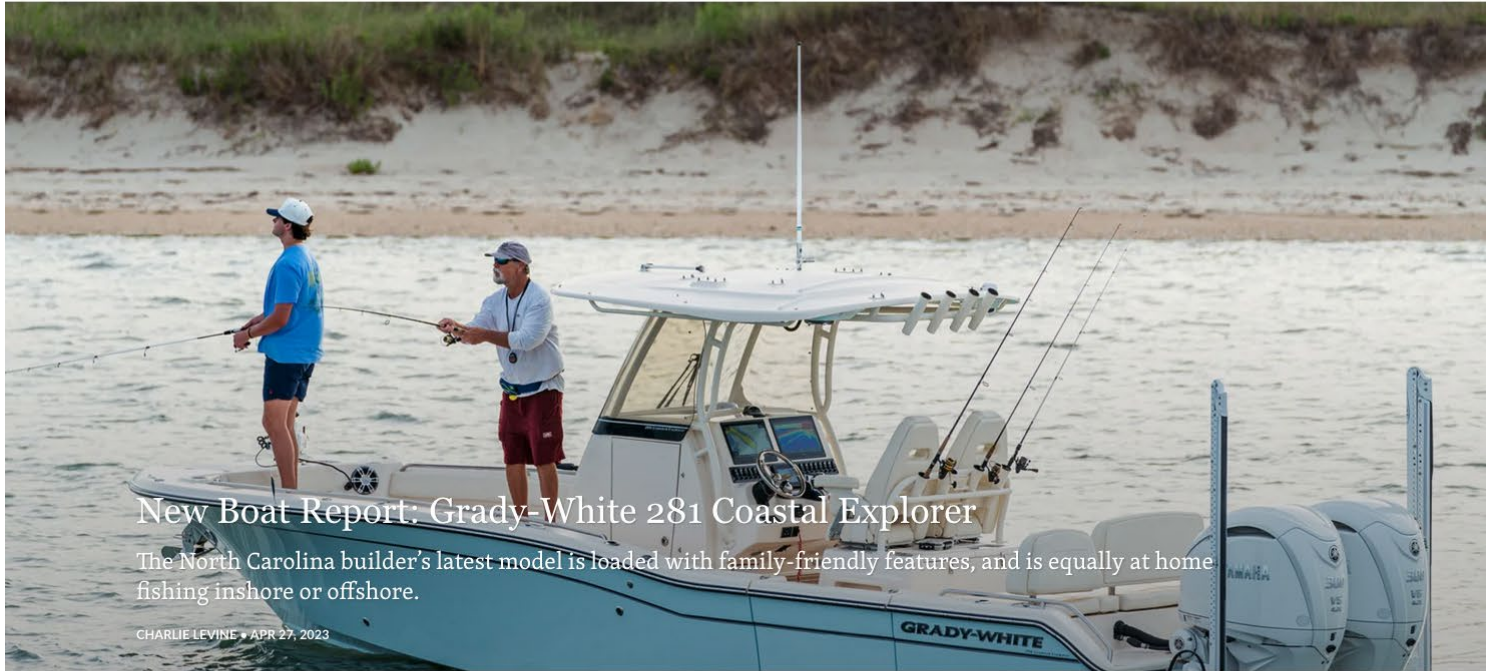


Anglers Journal



New Boat Report: Grady-White 281 Coastal Explorer

The North Carolina builder's latest model is loaded with family-friendly features, and is equally at home fishing inshore or offshore.

CHARLIE LEVINE • APR 27, 2023

The wants and needs of boaters continually change, and Grady-White knows this as well as any builder. The company launched its first boat in the late 1950s and constantly introduces new models and updates to stay ahead of the curve. The 281 Coastal Explorer is the quintessence of this mantra.



The 281 CE is extremely versatile — a center console that's ideal for families who like to mix it up on the water. The boat is equally at home on the offshore fishing grounds as it is nosing up to a sandbar or following a school of redfish along an inshore oyster bar.

Stepping aboard, it immediately spoke to me. I have two young boys, one who loves to fish and who prefers to anchor off the beach and play in the water. This boat is ideal for all of the above.



Every inch of the 281 CE is designed for multiple uses. The forward deck is a prime example. You can create a massive cushioned sunpad, especially when you insert the optional center piece that extends the seating. Lounge in comfort with electric, adjustable headrests on the side bench seats, or add an optional table for entertaining. When it's time to go fishing, stow the cushions, and you have a large forward casting deck. The boat is prerigged for a trolling motor, and I appreciated the unique platform that swivels out so the motor does not interfere with the sizable anchor locker.

Staying on top of the fish is as easy as pushing buttons. With a modern trolling motor on the bow, you can utilize the set lock function to keep the bow in place. The boat can also be optioned with Power-Poles on the transom for shallow-water anchoring, and if you opt for the twin 300-hp Yamaha power package that was on our test boat, you can also incorporate Helm Master joystick controls.



Whether you're running out to the fishing grounds or stocking up on provisions, the 296-quart fishbox/cooler under the forward console seat is the perfect spot for your catch, drinks or food.

Perhaps my favorite feature is the portside sport deck that drops down electrically. A removable boarding ladder clips into the platform to help swimmers get back on board. The dropdown platform adds deck space when relaxing at a calm anchorage and makes the 281 CE ideal for snorkeling, paddleboarding and other water sports.



Another great example of Grady's ingenuity is the aft bench seat. Instead of a generic, forward-facing bench along the transom, Grady designed backrest cushions that can be set in three configurations. Place the backrests in the forward position and insert an optional center backrest to seat three or more people. Remove the center backrest and swing the port and starboard backrests forward to create a lounge area. Or remove the cushions and turn the backrests aft for a walkthrough that creates a platform with a bolster to gaff fish or make a few casts.

From the helm, I enjoyed a clear view forward through an acrylic windshield that's integrated into the T-top with a painted aluminum frame. The T-top is rigged to fish, with LED spreader lights, rod holders, a radar flat and outrigger plates. The 281 CE has two plush helm seats with split, flip-up bolsters. Aft the seats is a live well and tackle storage. Inside the console is a roomy head with teak accents and plenty of headroom. The dash has space for twin MFDs and switches below. The throttles are situated in the middle of the console, ideal for right-handed operators.



Once we idled out of the no-wake zone and into South Florida's Biscayne Bay, we jumped to a 30 mph cruising speed, getting 2 to 2.5 mpg depending on the current. The boat took no spray as we cut through the wind chop.

The 281 CE utilizes Grady-White's proprietary SeaV² hull form, which pops up on plane quickly and stays on plane at low speeds. The variable-vee shape never skipped or walked across the surface in hard turns at 70 percent load, and the electric steering was supersmooth. The boat has plenty of midrange power to hop from cruise to wide open in a blink. We topped out at 56 mph. We hit some big wakes, which we slowed down for, and the boat landed softly.



Like all Grady-White models, the 281 CE felt solid, without any wobble or movements of the T-top. It was fun to drive, and I didn't want to hand back the keys at the end of our sea trial.

Specs:

LOA: 27'7" (without engines)

Beam: 9'4"

Draft: 19"

Fuel: 160 gallons

Weight: 5,650 pounds (without engines)

Power: Twin 300-hp Yamaha outboards