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ASTON SUPERBOAT MARTIN ON TEST

EXCLUSIVE FIRST DRIVE

FLAT OUT IN THE £1.6M AM37



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ASTON MARTIN AM37

The car manufacturer's first ever boat is a remarkable achievement, but has it got what it takes to win over serious boating enthusiasts?

Words **Hugo Andreae** Pictures **Max Earey, Carlo Borlenghi & Richard Langdon**

The first time I drove an Aston Martin is a time I'll never forget. I was a budding car journalist, barely out of short trousers and in awe of the trust placed in my inexperienced hands. The car in question was a Virage Vantage, a vast beast of a thing with a hand-built 5.3-litre supercharged V8 developing 550hp and enough torque to spin the globe on its axis.

At the time it was one of the most powerful cars in the world, yet it was dressed in such a sober set of hand-crafted aluminium panels that you'd never have known it. Even back in the 1990s, it was something of an anachronism – a lumbering dinosaur struggling to keep pace with a new breed of faster, leaner, sexier supercars from Italy, Germany and Japan. Did I care? Not a jot.

To me, Aston Martin was and still is the quintessential British supercar brand, a true gentleman's choice, holding firm against those brash impostors from across the Channel. Why shout about your success with Versace designer threads when you can whisper it quietly with a tailor-made Savile Row suit?

If I'm honest, it wasn't a particularly great car, at least not in my hands, but it was one of the greatest driving experiences of my life. It didn't matter that it wasn't as fast as a Porsche 911 Turbo or as agile as a Ferrari 348 – it had something far more important than that. It had soul.

Of course things have come a long way since then, and the latest generation of high-tech Aston Martins will happily rub wheel arches with Porsches and Ferraris on roads and race tracks around the world. But even the outrageous track-only Aston Martin Vulcan is still a gentleman's GT car at heart, albeit one bedecked with an entire swarm of carbon-fibre wings to try and keep its voluptuous curves pinned somewhere near the ground.

So when Quintessence Yachts announced that it had signed a licensing deal to build the first ever Aston Martin boat, the AM37, it was never going to be a stripped-out 100-knot race craft. That kind of speed may sound appealing but anybody who's driven a really fast boat knows that speeds over 50 knots are rarely an enjoyable experience. Exciting, yes, for a brief period, but also loud, scary and deeply uncomfortable in anything other than mirror-flat water. No, what it aspired to build was a swift, luxurious, elegant craft that captured the true spirit of Aston Martin; a British Grand Tourer that could outshine its glamorous rivals from Riva and Chris-Craft.

That's a hell of a big shout, especially for a brand new company that's essentially starting from scratch, but thanks to the remarkable efforts of its own engineers as well as the exceptional level of input from Aston Martin's design team, the first fruit of its labour is now waiting for me to drive. Hidden under a protective tent at the Royal Southern Yacht Club on the Hamble, it's a far cry from the Monaco Yacht Show where it made its global debut, but somehow it feels right to be sea-trialling it in home waters, even if the weather won't match the balmy conditions of the Mediterranean photoshoot. Besides, if the AM37 can impress us on a bleak British winter's day then we're fairly certain it'll do the trick for its likely owners in Saint-Tropez next summer.

LOOKS TO THRILL

The Quintessence crew have been fussing over the AM37 since 6am on the morning of our test, primping and preening the saddle-leather seats and mopping the dew off its glossy flanks like stable boys round a thoroughbred stallion. We try not to comment too much on the looks of boats we test, figuring that readers can make their own minds up about something as subjective as styling, but I can tell you that it looks way more seductive in the flesh than those first few publicly released photos suggested. That's partly due to the impossibly smooth and subtle surfacing of the deck, screen and topsides which seem to flow into each other like liquid metal to create a single taut shape that reflects the light in different ways as you move around it. It's also partly down to the exquisite detailing of the inset strips of stainless steel, flush-fitting smoked-glass decklights and those evocative Aston Martin badges that shimmer and glisten like jewels on a Fabergé egg. It has real presence, combining old-fashioned muscular proportions with a level of bleeding-edge technology never before seen on a boat this size.

If that sounds like a bold claim, take a moment to absorb the lengths



The deep single-stepped hull has a distinct affect on the way the AM37 performs

What Quintessence Yachts aspired to build was a luxurious craft that captured the true spirit of Aston Martin; a British Grand Tourer that could outshine any of its glamorous rivals



Aston Martin branding runs much deeper than a simple licensing deal



The surface detailing of the hull is exceptional

THE DATA

- LENGTH**
36ft 5in (11.1m)
- BEAM**
12ft 1in (3.68m)
- FUEL CAPACITY**
800 litres (176 gallons)
- WATER CAPACITY**
100 litres
- DRAUGHT**
2ft 2in (0.65m)
- RCD CATEGORY**
B
- DESIGNER**
Mulder Design & Aston Martin
- DISPLACEMENT**
6.7 tonnes (empty),
74 tonnes (full fuel and water)



The gorgeous flat-bottomed wheel is better suited to a car than a boat

the team has gone to differentiate the AM37 from its rivals. You won't find any off-the-shelf navigation screen, dials or throttle levers here; everything has been specifically designed and shaped for this one boat. The most extreme example of this is the complex three-piece carbon-fibre cockpit cover which negates the need for wrestling with the usual crude canvas tonneau and poppers. On this pre-production prototype it's still controlled by a remote switch on a cable but on the finished boat, it will all be managed by an app on the owner's smartwatch or phone. One touch and all the cockpit seats lower on hydraulic struts while the engine cover opens and the three panels start to slide into place using a complex system of wires, cables and pulleys. Each one hooks up the next as it emerges from its hiding place, slotting effortlessly into place and securing the cockpit against light fingers or heavy rain.

It's one of the reasons the aft deck is so long and rounded; it not only has to provide storage for these three panels but also a separate bimini hardtop that hinges forward on powered cantilever arms to shade the helmsman and crew from the heat of the midday sun.

No danger of needing that today, but the sound of those two Mercury Racing big block V8's erupting into life is enough to take the edge off the chill November air. On the finished boat, these mighty 520hp beasts will be coaxed into action by an Aston Martin starter button on the dash, maintaining the theatrical aura of the experience but for the moment, a simple pair of keys will suffice. Quintessence make no apologies for this being an engineering prototype, not merely the first boat off the line that will shortly be sold on to a customer. It is determined to get every detail right and working reliably rather than letting some poor customer do the snagging for them. It's an admirable if costly decision, but one that will surely pay dividends in the long run.

Stefan Whitmarsh, head of operations at Quintessence, eases the AM37 out of its lair with delicate dabs of throttle and the occasional burst of bow thruster, causing both of us to wince at the death rattle of the cavitating blades – even Aston Martin can't defy the laws of physics, but Stefan is confident they can make at least make them quieter.

A brief stop at the fuel berth to keep the big Mercs fed and we're out into Southampton Water. Stefan wants to give me a brief demonstration of what it can do before handing over the controls, easing it on to the plane with a bit of help from the trim tabs to keep the bow down. The initial surge of acceleration is urgent but not breathtaking, then just as I'm wondering if that's it, I'm rocked back on my heels by a second burst of power. It feels like a turbocharger kicking in but Stefan assures me it's simply the water releasing its grip on the hull as the deep single



A glass companionway door retracts at the touch of a button



Air vents are borrowed from the Aston Martin Vulcan track car. Exquisite detailing of carbon fibre and hand-stitched leather



The retractable carbon-fibre bimini provides shade at anchor

step starts to work its magic. Suddenly we are flying across the surface of the Solent, as flat and true as an arrow, unburdened by the 7-tonne weight of the boat or the cloying drag of the sea. It's intoxicating stuff and I need to know what it feels like from behind the helm.

TAKING THE WHEEL

Stefan begrudgingly swaps positions and allows me to settle into the helm seat, taking my time to adjust the various squabs to my preferred height and reach using the electronic toggle switch. I take a moment to breathe it all in – I haven't felt this excited since I sunk into the welcoming embrace of that Virage Vantage all those years ago and I'm determined to relish every moment of it.

The AM37 feels instinctively right. The ergonomics still need a bit of sorting – the view over the foredeck is distorted by that double-curvature screen, the wheel blocks the view of the too-small digital rev counters and the seat doesn't move back far enough to make standing a comfortable option – but boy does it feel good. Right hand wrapped around the gloriously tactile throttles, left hand gripping the sculpted rim of the wheel, I take a deep breath and engage the Bravo Three XR drives. They slip into gear as smoothly as a Rolls-Royce Phantom, with none of the histrionics you'd get from a surface drive boat with over 1,000hp on tap. The steering is light and responsive but not so quick as to unsettle the boat with every little nudge of the wheel.

I ease the throttles forward and listen to the barrel-chested V8s pile on the revs as the bow tips skyward and an unstoppable momentum starts to build beneath me. It clambers on to the plane at around 20



The table drops down to create a double bed, making it the first Aston Martin you can sleep in

THE TEST	
PERFORMANCE	
TEST ENGINES Twin Mercury Racing 520hp petrol	
FIGURES	
RPM	1,000 2,000 3,000 3,500 4,000 4,500 5,000 5,400
Speed	5 8 13 25.5 34 38.5 43 49
LPH	26.6 104 142 160 190 210 260 320
GPH	5.8 22.8 31.2 35.1 41.8 46.9 57.2 70.4
MPG	0.86 0.35 0.42 0.72 0.81 0.82 0.75 0.69
Range	120 49 59 101 114 116 105 97



Strips of stainless steel and glass accessorise the foredeck



Deep forefoot and pronounced spray rails keep the cockpit dry



The hull behaves exactly as you'd expect of a fast gran turismo, leaning into turns gradually and predictably rather than diving into them aggressively



knots but doesn't truly hit its stride until closer to 30 knots when that step comes into play. In fact, as the fuel flow figures show, it's at its most efficient when skimming across the surface at 35-40 knots and even at 45 knots, it's no thirstier mile for mile than at half that speed.

Clearly efficiency is a relative term when describing a boat with twin 520hp petrol engines but this is the speed at which the AM37 feels in its element – swallowing up the miles at an improbable rate in remarkable comfort. Suddenly, that fancy windscreen comes into its own, funneling the airstream up and over the cockpit, leaving the front-seat passengers blissfully unaware of the 50-knot gale whistling over their heads. There is still some fine tuning of the props and weight distribution planned to ensure the ideal balance between acceleration and outright speed, but things aren't exactly shabby as they stand with a top speed on our test of 49 knots and the promise of a couple more still to come.

What is clear is that the hull behaves exactly as you'd expect of a fast gran turismo, leaning into turns gradually and predictably rather than diving into them aggressively and threatening to dip a rail into the water. Far better to keep the propellers spinning and take a wider line rather than scrubbing off speed with a tighter track. That way you can revel in the predictable degree of stern slip that the hull allows, a little like a powerful rear-wheel-drive sports car but without the heart-stopping over-steer moment.

This is addictive stuff and I can't resist performing for the video camera rather more than is strictly necessary, even if it does result in a near swamping of the RIB where our photographer Richard is hanging on for dear life. It's only when Stefan tells me that the poor engineer,

whom we packed below decks for the duration of the shoot, is feeling a little green around the gills from being flung around the cabin like a cat in a washing machine that I finally take the hint and ease off the throttle.

In the interests of equality, and the fact that this is the first Aston Martin to boast a bed and a galley, I take a turn below decks to see how it measures up. As you'd expect, headroom is in limited supply for those over 6ft tall but the fit and finish is every bit as special as you would expect, although I was mildly disappointed not to find a wood and leather toilet seat just for the hell of it.

It's the cockpit that really shines though with its rich mix of soft leather saddlebags, glossy carbon-fibre mouldings and highly polished metals. Nor have they entirely forgotten the practical side of things, with dedicated storage for the bespoke fenders that clip into place using special popper attachments. Even the anchoring system deploys automatically from its hiding place under the foredeck at the touch of a button, which is probably just as well given the slippery rounded side decks that you'd have to negotiate to make your way there on foot.

By the time we return to the AM37's special covered berth, I'm smitten. It's not quite the finished article, as the team is quite happy to admit, but it's clear that it has already achieved what many thought impossible. It has created a boat that not only looks and feels quite different to anything else out there but one that captures the spirit of a true Aston Martin. It may have more in common with the latest high-tech DB11 than the classic Aston Martins of old but just like that Virage Vantage of my youth, it's positively dripping with soul. **MSI**
Contact Quintessence Yachts. Tel +44 (0)7881 305 865.



All the cockpit seats drop and the carbon-fibre covers slide into place at the touch of a button



Twin 520hp Mercury V8 petrol engines were fitted to the prototype but diesels are also an option



The anchor folds out automatically from under the foredeck

THE COSTS	
THE COSTS & OPTIONS	
Price from (2 x 430hp)	£1.26 million
Price from (2 x 370hp diesel)	£1.30 million
Price from (2 x 520hp)	£1.34 million
Price as tested	£1.62 million
Carbon-fibre sliding cockpit covers	£149,890
Carbon-fibre retractable bimini	£59,290
Clima 12,000 BTU air-conditioning	£9,805
3kW petrol generator	£17,994
Bow thruster	£16,754
48in TV entertainment package	£4,778
Stainless-steel anchor upgrade	£1,952
Stainless-steel chain upgrade	£2,809
= Options on test boat	