

tradeboat

Australia's Best-Selling Boating Magazine

STORY JEFF STRANG PHOTOS ELLEN DEWAR VIDEO MILKMAN PRODUCTIONS

FRIDAY ON MY MIND



I apologise in advance for fawning outrageously over the Fleming 55. Those who find this approach offensive need not read on. Those who wish to know more about vessel that has few rivals on these shores, enjoy — **JEFF STRANG**





Easily the best place on the boat to take in the view. This expansive flying bridge comes complete with a full helm station and a dumbwaiter. Bring on the prawns!



[HIGHS]

- ▶ Exceptional build quality
- ▶ First-class engineering
- ▶ Delightfully unhurried feel
- ▶ A place for everything and everything in its place

[LOWS]

- ▶ My unrequited love

I love my job and end most days with a sense of satisfaction in my toil. However, driving to the hotel at the conclusion of our day on the Fleming 55 in the emerald waters of Moreton Island, a cosy glow of genuine contentment was accompanied by a beam the Cheshire Cat would be proud of. Like a drug, the Fleming 55 seems to be irresistibly mood altering.

Repeatedly described as the benchmark of pilothouse cruisers the Fleming came with a reputation I found somewhat intimidating. What if I didn't like it, or worse still found serious flaws in its construction. Would it be me at fault or would it be the boat. Fortunately that situation did not arise.

The 55 hull was first launched in 1986 and is claimed by its promoters to have been judged one of the 10 best looking boats of all time by an influential boating magazine. It wasn't *Trade-a-Boat*, but it's not a bad idea for a future story.

This boat, appropriately named *Friday*, is certainly a looker. It's one of those times when the class isn't intangible; you can see it in the depth of the paintwork and the quality of the fittings. Take one step aboard, through the wide gate in the side bulwark and you're hooked forever — much like sliding into the back seat of a Rolls-Royce Silver

Ghost. "Home James, if you please."

One of the more interesting aspects of the Fleming 55 is its mixed heritage. She looks like a born-and-bred eastern United States blue-blood complete with a lifetime's supply of Long Island Ice Tea, but she's actually nothing of the sort.

Company founder and global roaming talisman Tony Fleming is an ex-pat Brit who resides in the US. If the Fleming brand has a rival then it would have to be Grand Banks; the company Tony Fleming spent 22 years working for. The company itself is based in Costa Mesa, California, while the vessels are constructed at the Tung Hwa factory in Taiwan. For those that are not aware Taiwan is home to some of the highest quality boatbuilding yards in the world, including the Tung Hwa yard.

This mixed input of vision and genetics ensures the Fleming range doesn't suffer from any of the tunnel vision or staid philosophies sometimes found in similar stables. Indeed the company is not scared to try a new idea or two. Take a look at the depth of finish in those timber railings. Only they are not timber at all, it's an imitation product with a gelcoat finish that De Beers couldn't pick from the real thing.

This is the sort of radical approach that gets traditionalists nervously

shuffling and muttering "it's just not cricket" behind the closed doors of the gentlemen's clubs. For me it speaks volumes of a decisive team who understands their customers are time-poor. Surely they can pay someone to re-sand the varnish two to three times yearly? Why would you if the imitation product looks better, lasts exponentially longer, and costs less.

BUILT FOR THE SEA

In *An interview with Tony Fleming* (worthwhile reading and available online), Tony states his objective from the onset was to build the best vessels available for coastal and offshore cruising. He says he took a fresh and objective look at every system and every piece of equipment on offer and selected only those best suited to serious bluewater cruising. From there he put the experience of lifetime building the best and set to work.

Every vessel I have stepped onboard that is truly built to go to sea has a common denominator — weight. At more than 30 tonnes dry the Fleming 55 is around 8000kg heavier than the bulk of vessels in the 55ft range.

Most modern vessels use a cored construction technique, where the hull is composed of light core material sandwiched between two

relatively thin layers of glass. These boats are lighter and faster than those constructed of solid glass, but this performance comes at a compromise in terms of seakeeping and hull longevity.

Tony Fleming has always preferred solid glass and is often accused of overbuilding the Fleming range. His response is that of a true bluewater sailor. "Ninety-five per cent of the time a boat will never be in seas or in circumstances that test its limits," says Fleming, "but on that rare occasion, perhaps a collision with a container in the middle of the night, it is reassuring to know that boats identical to yours have survived fully intact, and that your builder designed the boat for just such an eventuality."

He also persists with full-length keels in all his hulls. Full-length keels improve stability by lowering the centre of gravity and providing increased resistance to rocking effects. They also protect the running gear from potentially crippling damage. Personally, I am not convinced that a full-length keel is always a good thing on a high-speed vessel running in a significant sea. I have had some interesting and quite scary

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“ THE INTERNAL CONFIGURATION... IS HIGHLY PRACTICAL AND ALLOWS GUESTS TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF THE VARIOUS OPTIONS WITHOUT DISTURBING OTHERS



experiences when the keel has tried to force its way to the surface due to the effect of planing forces. No such issue would arise on a Fleming 55 though. High speed is never a priority on a Fleming, although, apparently, they will exceed 20kts if enough horsepower is made available.

SPACE TO MOVE

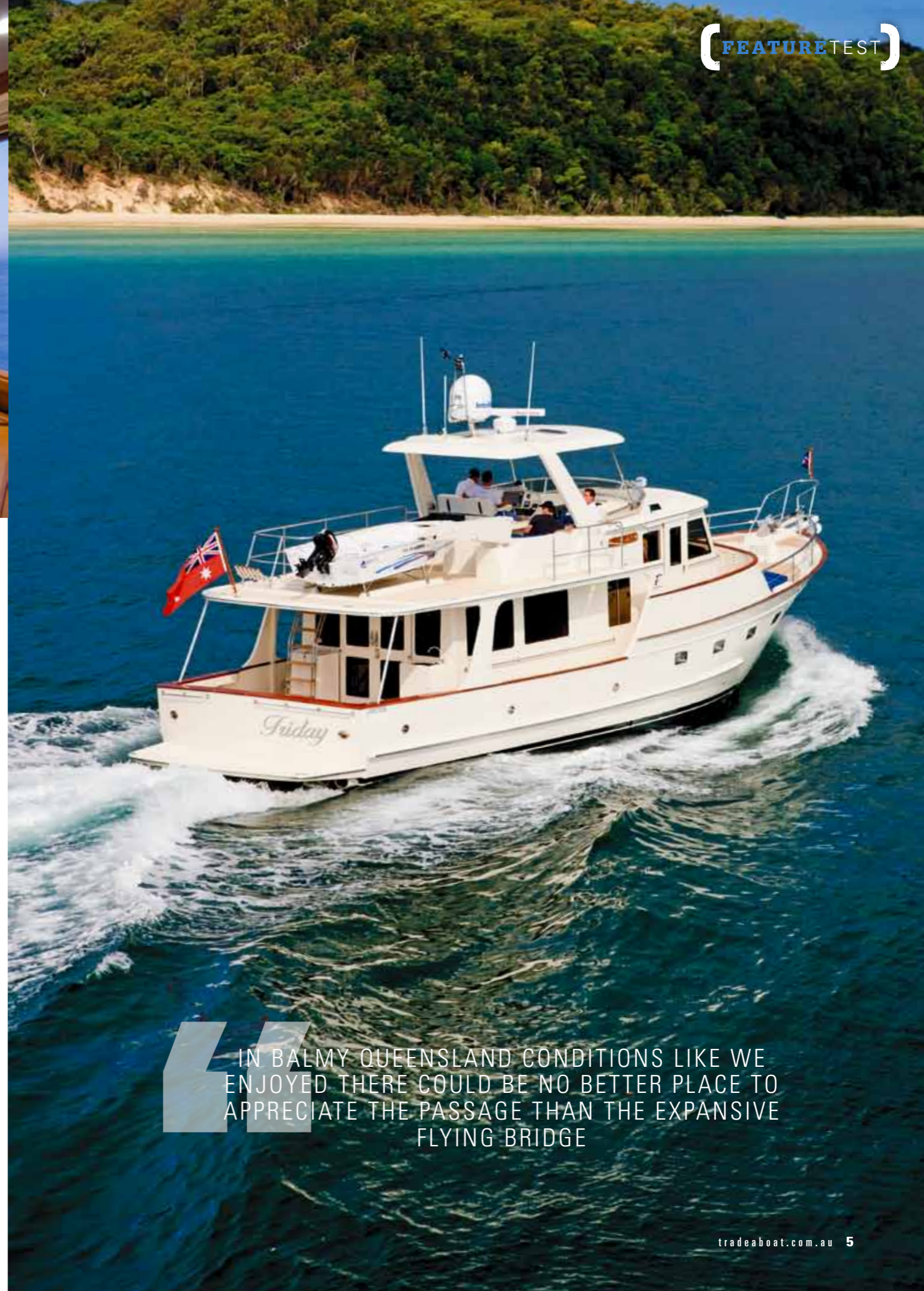
Anyone who has spent time clambering around the sides of working vessels like a spider monkey will be delighted to find themselves on a vessel where a trip to the anchor locker is no more hazardous than a stroll to the letterbox. There is no shortage of grabrails,

but in most conditions these will be surplus to requirements. High coamings and 22in-wide sidedecks ensure the comfort and safety of all crewmembers at all times.

The Portuguese bridge deck is stylish and it performs at least two important functions. In a heavy seaway it prevents any significant volumes of water from flooding down the sidedecks, and it acts as an extra barrier to prevent the youngsters using the bow section as their own personal play pen. “Do not open this gate — or else!”

Two things I was slightly surprised to note was the lack of scuppers in those sidedecks (perhaps it doesn't need them), and it was interesting to see that the main entry gate opens inwards rather than outwards, which is more the norm for vessels engaging in regular passagemaking. This is probably because outwards-opening gates can be difficult to work with at the dock, so fair enough on that one.

The Fleming's saloon (top) proves timber is never out of style. Obviously the accommodation (middle and left) is comfortable, but it's the finish that stands out. Even the workmanship behind the scenes, like the under-bunk storage (below) is first-class.



“ IN BALMY QUEENSLAND CONDITIONS LIKE WE ENJOYED THERE COULD BE NO BETTER PLACE TO APPRECIATE THE PASSAGE THAN THE EXPANSIVE FLYING BRIDGE



The engineroom (bottom left two images) makes a statement a bluewater enthusiast cannot ignore. Simplistic but reliable systems (left) are employed in many critical applications.

ENTER THE PALACE

Step through the rear saloon door and you will find yourself in a world of refinement accentuated by rich and sumptuous furnishings and warmly toned teak. Invest some time researching previous editorial written on the Fleming 55 from around the world and you will find the full thesaurus of generous adjectives and clichés. “Classic”, “timeless”, “home away from home” — they all fit and are difficult to add to in a meaningful way. Slide that door shut behind you and the space is transformed into one that could be 100 miles from the sea — accept for the view of course.

Clearly Tony Fleming understands how important it is to be capable of providing this level of isolation from the throb and vibration of the engine. He has achieved that goal as well as I have ever observed. It is a delight to experience in the flesh but the real payback for passengers is in the restfulness of the effect. Much like noise-cancelling headphones on a long-haul flight, the beautiful acoustics play a much larger role in the pleasure of the journey than most are aware.



PRIVACY FOR ALL

The internal configuration, which divides the three primary living spaces into distinctly separate zones, is highly practical and allows guests to make the best use of the various options without disturbing others.

An expansive and impressively outfitted galley sits amidships in the same space as the luxurious saloon described in brief above. As any experienced sailor would expect all the benchtops, in fact all the flat surfaces — side-shelves and tabletops included — featured raised edges. It is pleasing to see this as all too often designers remove these and other simple but essential practicalities, like stovetop fiddles, in a misguided attempt to build boats that feel more like apartments.

Move forward and down the beautifully timber-trimmed staircase and you arrive in the main accommodation areas. Again the Fleming organisation have stayed with the classic and well proven layout of a generous master cabin

with adjoining en suite in the forepeak, a VIP cabin aft and to port, with a crew cabin featuring twin singles to starboard. Naturally these two cabins are serviced by a separate bathroom that double-duties as a dayhead.

Without making unnecessary statements of the obvious these sleeping quarters are all we could ask in classic styling and anyone who appreciates the pure pleasure of sleeping on a quiet sea in total comfort will love the Fleming 55. It should be mentioned that there are enough alternative berthing options on offer to ensure your Fleming 55 can be tailored to suit your precise requirements.

The wardrobes and other amenities in the master cabin, and indeed everywhere we look on *Friday*, are quite frankly beautifully appointed. It's good to see the storage under the mattress hydraulically accessed as that takes the effort out of utilising that space but it was the dedicated escape hatch that really caught my eye. Enclosed seamlessly into the roof it lowers to reveal a wooden staircase built to the same standard of excellence as the rest of the vessel. It seems trivial to mention but on lesser vessels these are the features that often look rushed in the finishing.

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

In balmy Queensland conditions like we enjoyed there could be no better place to appreciate the passage

than the expansive flying bridge. A second helm station, which houses all the electronic essentials found in the pilothouse, takes pride of place. But with seating for 11, plenty of refrigeration and a dumbwaiter on hand to keep all and sundry refreshed in total convenience it is unlikely the skipper will find him or herself wanting for company.

Also on *Friday's* roof is her tender. With so much space on offer it does not encroach in any way. Those wishing to access the cockpit without trekking through the vessel's interior can make use of the trapdoor aft.

DEDICATED PILOTHOUSE

For me, this pilothouse is a highlight. As any skipper with a few serious sea miles under their belt can attest there are times, such as in poor weather, limited visibility, or when navigating congested waterways in the dark, when total isolation is required to navigate safely without distraction. The Fleming 55 provides for this necessity with a totally dedicated helm. With doors closed and a plethora of navigation instruments at the skipper's disposal, making way, under even extreme conditions, can be conducted in a seamanlike manner. If needed, a coffee or an extra set of eyes can be summoned at the touch of a button.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

It is clear to me that Tony Fleming



wanted to make a statement in the engineroom. Much of the engineering that supports the twin 500hp Cummins QSC 8.3 powerplants would be considered “old school” by the new generation of boatbuilders. But there is reason born of experience behind items like the traditional stuffing box shaft seals and the manual fuel management system. In simple terms true passagemakers cannot afford total failures of any sort and these relatively simplistic systems will keep working long after an untimely saltwater spray destroys a fly-by-wire system or fatigue causes the catastrophic failure of a shaft seal spring.

Needless to say much of the equipment is considerably heavier

FLEMING 55

PRICED AS TESTED

\$1,990,000

OPTIONS FITTED

ABT TRAC stabilisers, Side-Power sternthruster (bowthruster standard), second generator, custom stainless steel fridge-freezer on aft deck, Raymarine electronics, sound systems, flatscreen TVs, hardtop, extended flybridge deck over aft deck/cockpit, extended swimplatform, Wi-Fi, Yacht Sentinel security alarm system, tender, canvas covers, and more

PRICED FROM

\$1,700,000 (dependent on USD exchange rate)

GENERAL

HULL: Solid fibreglass

TYPE: Semi-displacement monohull

HULL LENGTH: 16.99m

LOA: 18.5m

BEAM: 4.88m

DRAFT: 1.52m

WEIGHT: 36,368kg (loaded); 30,754kg (light ship)

CAPACITIES

FUEL: 3785lt (four tanks)

WATER: 1135lt (four tanks)

BLACKWATER: 378lt

ENGINES

MAKE/MODEL: 2 x Cummins QSC 8.3

TYPE: Turbo-diesel

RATED HP: 500 (each)

GEARBOX/RATIO: Twin Disc MG5075A /2.53:1

SUPPLIED BY

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LAYOUT



TO ME, SHE IS COMPLETELY IN HER ELEMENT AT 10KTS AND AS SUCH IS A VESSEL CLEARLY DESIGNED TO BE AS MUCH ABOUT THE JOURNEY AS THE DESTINATION

[tradeboat SAYS...]

If the smile I carried for days after the test is anything to go by, and unless your personal requirements are at the extreme end of any spectrum, you will be hard pressed to find better.

than required, although I can think of bigger problems to have than an over-engineered engine room. Any ship's mechanic would be delighted to see the quality of the plumbing and wiring, and the huge amount of servicing space will be music to an aching back.

ON THE WATER

With so much weight, and with technology on-hand like ABT Trac digital stabilisers, *Friday's* ride was always going to be fabulous. She isn't the quickest but for my money her semi-displacement hull provides the best of both worlds. A top speed of 18kts is achieved a good margin short of wide-open-throttle and pushing her any harder only results in an increased fuel burn. To me, she is completely in her element at 10kts and as such is a vessel clearly designed to be as much about the journey as the destination. In today's world so focused on immediate goals, this philosophy is a breath of fresh air. Cruising on *Friday* reminded me of the simple pleasure

of being at sea, just for the sake of it.

To say that I was impressed with the Fleming 55 could well be the understatement of my tenure at the helm of *Trade-a-Boat* magazine. This boat is built to a level that goes a long way towards defining its class.

As others have said, in many ways the Fleming 55 is the quintessential bluewater cruising boat. Presented as is she speaks of an age of grace and beauty, and yet is not scared to push the envelope by developing technologies to improve the product without detracting from its mission. As stated above, the engineering is quite simply first class and answers all the questions I could ask in terms of practicality, longevity and redundancy.

As for lifestyle her utterly unhurried approach is perfectly complemented by the extensive list of features on hand. If the smile I carried for days after is anything to go by, and unless your personal requirements are at the extreme end of any spectrum, you will be hard pressed to find better. ✓