



AUSTRALASIA'S LEADING MARINE LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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# WATERSPORTS TRIFECTA

Aussie brands Malibu Boats and Axis Wake Research have each launched a 20ft model that'll pretty much guarantee their owners an endless summer of fun.

By Liliana Engelhardt

Both the Malibu Wakesetter 20VTX and the Axis A20 come with Malibu's proprietary wake-making technology – Surf Gate, Power Wedge III, and ballast systems with Plug 'n' Play ballast.

They also include the Surf Band wrist remote with which the rider can control the wave, the boat's speed and the stereo's volume while surfing.

Invented by Malibu Boats, the Power Wedge III is a large plate at the back of the boat that lowers into the water to pull the back of the boat deeper down, creating a bigger and steeper wake. It adds 680kg of simulated ballast to turn the wake into a customisable wave for surfing.

Surf Gate employs two vertically mounted plates with high-speed hydraulic actuators on either side of the back of the boat that push water from the side. This shapes the wake with smooth transitions and moves the face of the wave from left to right in the blink of an eye, without moving any ballast.

**both boats made deep, long and clean wakes even in shallow water**

The height and follow of a boat's wake is also influenced by the water's depth – during our review, both boats made deep, long and clean wakes even in shallow water.

Both models are fitted with Malibu ballast systems with tanks in the bow, centre and rear that add customisable weight to the hull, eliminating the need to shuffle passengers around or other primitive methods of creating a rideable wake, and with no compromise to passenger comfort or view forward for the driver. The ballast tanks fill/empty quickly, so there's very little delay when changing riders or wake styles.

Another feature the two 20-footers share is a 2.49 beam and 11-person capacity – the Axis has more space in the bow, thanks to the pickle-fork hull that carries the beam's full width all the way to the bow's dual tips. Also, both have a windscreen walk-through with a hinged part in the middle that opens for easy access to the bow, and plenty of drinkholders and handrails throughout.

Back as much fun as possible into a 20ft hull and make it look real hot seems to have been the credo when the mavericks at Malibu Australia and Axis Wake Research got to work on their new 2020 models, the Malibu Wakesetter 20VTX and the Axis A20.

Built in Albury, NSW, by a team that is, in their own words, fanatical about boats, the sibling brands manufacture handcrafted recreational watersports boats that are also used as towboats in the professional waterski and wakeboard arena.

The new Wakesetter 20VTX is Malibu's versatile 'triple threat' that's fine-tuned for slalom skiing, wakesurfing and wakeboarding, while the Axis A20 emphasises the Wake Research crew's wakesurfing and wakeboarding credentials.



*Top: Long, clean and rideable wakes are a hallmark of Malibu and Axis craft.*

*Top right: 20VTX helm sports high-tech devices to control all functions, including the playlist.*

*Bottom: New Cut Diamond Hull with Gorilla fins.*

*Bottom right: Surf Band lets the rider control their experience, including music volume.*



Options include a multitude of colour combinations for the hull and interior (head to the websites to use the 'build your boat' function to play around with colour selections), additional speakers, additional board racks on the tower, and bimini (included on both review boats).

The 2020 pricing and the options/standard list for the new models weren't available at time of publishing, but Malibu dealers will have that information in due course.

### MALIBU WAKESSETTER 20VTX

Malibu's 20-footer rides on a new Cut Diamond Hull, which features a vee-entry, Gorilla fins

that help keep a perfect line, and reverse chines that help lift the hull at ski speeds to create soft, passable wakes for tournament-quality slalom skiing.

Other slalom-friendly features include the new short-winged windshield that lets the driver communicate more directly with the rider, and the TXi Performance Tower, which is swept forward at the mounts so that the ski rope can pass unobstructed from side to side while the skier takes on the course. There's also a new removable centre ski pylon.

And with all that wake-making technology also onboard, the 20VTX is equally suited to wakesurfing and wakeboarding – Malibu calls it a 'triple threat' crossover boat that makes everyone happy whether they're skiing, boarding or surfing.

The helm is also new, with large digital displays and touchscreens to control the boat's functions, as well as a high-res reverse camera to see what's going on behind the boat while driving, and a touchscreen control panel for the stereo that can sync with mobile phones, including connecting to Spotify playlists.

### AXIS A20

While the Axis build quality and performance are of the same high standard as Malibu's boats, Axis does without some of the more costly options, instead sporting simplified helms with less high-tech instruments, and interiors that are not quite as detailed and plush, but definitely high-quality and very comfortable. This gives buyers the option to own a stylish, trailerable, high-performance watersports boat with superior wake-making equipment at a modest price point.

The Axis A20 rides on the Wake Plus hull, which lets the boat sit deeper in the water at slower speeds for more water displacement, and includes a pickle-fork bow that carries the 2.49





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beam all the way forward. The ride was dry and soft, even at full pelt in a moderate chop.

And just like the 20VTX, it's surprisingly roomy onboard, with loads of stowage for gear and space for 11 adults. Head forward via a central hinged part in the windscreen to the bow, where wraparound lounges make good use of the pickle-fork bow's full width. Or watch the action comfortably seated on the rear-facing sliding Axis Skybox Seat, or on the full-width rear lounge.

The helm has been updated, too, with the dash sporting new white 3-in-1 gauges, a new central touchscreen that integrates menu navigation, Surf Gate controls and speed control, a new panel of soft-key switches, and controls for the Power Wedge and ballast system. New helm and transom remotes for the audio system let the driver or passengers adjust the music.

More information: Malibu Boats Australia, web: [malibuboats.com.au](http://malibuboats.com.au). Axis Wake Research, web: [axiswake.com.au](http://axiswake.com.au).

Find a Malibu/Axis dealer in Australia or New Zealand at: [malibuboats.com.au/dealers](http://malibuboats.com.au/dealers)

Left the Axis A20, right the Malibu Wakesetter 20VTX – both boats make superb wakes for wakeboarding (top), wakesurfing (middle) and skiing (bottom). Deeper water and onboard settings let riders adjust the wake to perfectly suit their style.

# MAKING WAVES

**Malibu CEO, Jack Springer, talks to *Club Marine* about the ongoing drive for innovation and new models from the leading towsports boatbuilder.**



Jack Springer is a big guy with big ideas. Since signing on as Malibu Boats CEO in 2009 he's been instrumental in turning the company around after it – and the rest of the worldwide boating industry – stood at the precipice after the Global Financial Crisis of late 2008.

By Chris Beattie

Under Springer's leadership the company, based in Loudon, Tennessee, has emerged from the mire stronger, leaner and with a suite of craft that is considered premium quality in the world of towsports.

A recent Earnst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year award underline's Springer's reputation for driving new and innovative processes in the company.

"That was really a team award for Malibu as far as I'm concerned," says the recipient. "Like I tell everyone, it all comes back to the team. They make you better."

Much of the company's latter-day success is down to a thorough revision of its internal processes and also an almost relentless drive to launch new product across its Malibu and more affordable Axis lines on the back of intensive consultation with customers and dealers, says Springer.

"We have a lot of discussions with our customers. I can't tell you how many times a customer has come up to us at a show or other event and said: 'Have you ever thought about doing this or that?' Now it may take a year or two for some of those ideas to make it onto the actual boats, but customer feedback and input is an essential part of our new product process.

"At Malibu, we're also users of our boats, so we're constantly looking at how we can make customers' experiences better and more exciting behind the boat."

Springer says that the feedback process also extends to the now fully owned subsidiary, Malibu Boats Australia (MBA), based in the town of Albury, NSW. In fact, the Australian market is now Malibu's second largest in terms of sales, after the company's core US stronghold, according to Springer.

"Canada was our number two market after the States, and then Europe, but now Australia is the second biggest market and is obviously very important given we also have a factory here," he says. "We're now building more boats in Australia than ever before, including for the Asian and European markets."

Australian production – and workforce – has been expanded due to the fact that rising import tariffs applied to US products have created an export opportunity for the local operation.

Springer says while the US parent took over MBA in 2014, he is keen to ensure the company retains its own Australian identity and product line as much as possible.

"We appreciate that Malibu Boats Australia is very much an Australian company, building boats for Australians," he affirmed. "We recognise that we need to retain that unique local culture and heritage.

"The team in Albury is doing a phenomenal job. Last year they came out with their own new boat for Australia, the Response TXR, and my view is they know the Australian customer a lot better than I do."

Springer has a long and close relationship with MBA founder Xavier West, who continues to have an association with the company.

"Xavier's knowledge and experience is still at our disposal and we have regular contact – I stay with him occasionally when I'm out here – it's a great relationship."

He says the local market and towsports scene differ to the US in that there are significantly more skiers here, although boarding in its various forms is continuing to show strong growth.

Springer says the GFC was a make or break moment for Malibu and provided an opportunity to not only modernise some of the company's internal processes, but also pour more effort into R&D.

"We are driven to bring new products and boats to market and now bring out four new boats a year, between Malibu and Axis, which is by far more than our competition. In addition, we bring out between 40 and 50 new features a year. There have been years in which we've brought out more product, features and options than all of our competitors combined."

The market- and lifestyle-changing Surf Gate feature is a prime example of Malibu's determination to continue to innovate and influence the sport.

"Surf Gate was huge because it created a whole new sport," says Springer. "Wake surfing did exist, but Surf Gate really took it to the masses through better waves, convenience and ease of use. We're always looking for the 'next Surf Gate' or what might be another game-changing innovation."

An emerging trend in the US that is likely to impact here is the move towards larger wake and tow boats.

"In the States we're seeing people going up in length, say from 21 to 22ft or even 23ft. We can really see that progression so we're now making boats that are bigger or longer, such as the new 23ft MXZ, which is a bigger version of the 22.

"A few years ago, you couldn't get a good surf or wake wave behind a boat of around 27 or 28 feet. But there has been a lot of progress lately and I think we're going to see bigger boats, although widths aren't going to change, keeping in mind that Australia has specific towing regulations for beam."

The direct injection Malibu Monsoon V8 engine packages are another innovation that Springer is particularly proud of. Introduced in early 2019, the Malibu Monsoon range, which is now produced in-house and includes the M5Di and M6Di, incorporates a number of features to make the engines quieter, more fuel-efficient and easier to maintain.

Springer says the new engines represent a thorough revamp designed to improve the customer experience.

"One of our priorities was to remove a lot of the failure points on the engines, such as drive belts or hoses. We source our base engines from General Motors and we take that proven technology and modify it for marine use.

"One of the big things we've done is introduce our Front End Accessory Drive (FEAD) system, which now involves only one belt and one hose, so it's a lot

simpler and more efficient. And everything that needs regular maintenance is right at the front of the motor so maintenance and servicing is much easier and more user-friendly.

"We've also taken a tremendous amount of noise out of the engines. It's now much easier to have conversations with people surfing at the back of the boat."

Malibu has also acquired new brands in recent times, namely the US-based Cobalt and Pursuit lines of boats. While the Cobalt range is already available across Australasia, Springer says the Pursuit range of fishing and cruising craft will be seen here in coming months once the dealer network has been finalised.

"Both those brands have a commonality with Malibu and social boating. They are both very premium brands that are directly complementary to what we do."

Underlining Springer's vision for Malibu and its subsidiaries is the family focus of the boats, the sport and the lifestyle. He says that via programs like the company's Just Ride events, which encourage families to experience towsports in a controlled and relaxed environment, he aims to grow the sport and markets.

"We're now taking the sport further afield. We've recently introduced Just Ride into China and I believe once they've experienced the sport and understand what they can do on our boats, there's a lot of growth potential there.

"The common denominator with our customers is that they're outdoors people and they enjoy spending time with their family on the water. And let's face it, there are very few things you can do now where you can get the phone out of the kids' hands for four or five hours." 

## Surf Gate was huge because it created a whole new sport

