





FEATURE

Yamaha Helm Master EX

HELM YEAH!

Yamaha's Helm Master EX system is the next step forward for joystick operation on outboard powered boats

STORY **Kevin Smith** PICS **Kevin Smith, Supplied**

Joystick piloting of outboards has been possible for some time — in particular with Yamaha's Helm Master, which is suited to dual, triple, and quad outboards. Dedicated to simplifying manoeuvrability, making docking a breeze and even adding safety to a degree, these joystick piloting systems have without a doubt taken boating to a new level for the novice and experienced boater alike.

My first experience using the Helm Master joystick was in 2015 on a trip to the Mecca of boat manufacturing, the Grady White headquarters based in Greenville North Carolina, USA. One of the reviews included the Grady 375 Freedom, swanking a power bank of the latest triple Yamaha 300hp outboards, with integrated Helm Master joystick control. Cut a long American story short, the Helm Master control was insane to say the least — the independent electronically steered motors cork screwed in different directions, providing the most simplified

low speed manoeuvrability and boat docking control. The anxiety and stress of stuffing up docking was most certainly something of the past, and basically any clown could look like a pro using this system.

Time's ticked on and numerous brands have made their own joystick control systems available for outboards. One of the eye-opener releases for this year is no doubt Yamaha's new Helm Master EX, the first dedicated joystick control for single installation outboards. There's also a lot more to it than just being a standard joystick control — this system is branded as the 'EX', standing for expandable, which takes it to the next level having an overload of what would have to be the most technical and advanced features on the market. Joystick control, new touchscreen gauges, new control boxes, new autopilot system, and most importantly, some really innovative fishing features that can lock you on the spot, maintain drift angles and so much more.





JOYSTICK WITH MORE THAN A FEW TWISTS

The big hype is obviously that this is the first dedicated joystick for single Yamaha outboards. Don't panic, those with twins, triples and even quad Yamahas can play too. It's not a new system dedicated to only 'new' outboard purchases, it can run on any Yamaha 2.8L and above with drive-by-wire.

So, what makes it different to the Helm Master predecessor? It's far more sophisticated and more than just an attractive docking joystick to play with. Branded as the 'EX' (expandable) version, the full integrated system boasts some off-the-chart features, particularly when it comes to serious fishing and navigation — and all at the simple touch of a few buttons.

Being expandable means you can opt for the complete system with all the big bang features in one hit — if the budget allows — or gently ease into it bit by bit without the partner realising what you've spent. Looking at the expandable option, there are four levels and each upgrade is fairly simple as there's no hydraulics, additional batteries or third-party integration components needed. I think there's going to be a number of people upgrading to this system, so let's start with the budget way of upgrading to existing 2.8L drive-by-wire models on transoms, then ending with the full install in one hit.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT Yamaha's Cruise Craft F360M is the ideal platform to test the Helm Master EX; The F360M sports a 14 ¼ x 17in prop; And is powered by Yamaha's F200

FROM TOP Yamaha's CL5 touchscreen display is standard with even the basic Helm Master EX package; The only thing wrong with this picture is the empty rod holders



Facts & Figures

CRUISE CRAFT EX 720 ST (EXPLORER 720 SOFT TOP)

OPTIONS FITTED

- Twin Yamaha F150XCA EFI four-stroke motor
 - Coloured hull sides
- HUGE Garmin electronics pack
 - Fusion Stereo Pack
 - Garmin VHF Marine Radio
 - Cruise Craft Custom Eskies
 - Helm Master Level 4 Pack
 - Custom bait-board
- Saltwater and Freshwater Deck Wash (50L fresh)
 - 310L of fuel
- Custom Cruise Craft Trailer by Mayfair Marine

PRICED FROM

BMT - \$149,990 with Yamaha F250XCA

GENERAL

TYPE Cabin

MATERIAL GRP

LENGTH 7.2m

BEAM 2.5m

WEIGHT 2970kg including std fuel (310ltrs)

DEADRISE 20 degrees

CAPACITIES

PEOPLE 7

BERTHS 1

REC. HP 250

MAX. HP 300 or 2 x 150

FUEL 310L (opt 370L)

WATER FRESH Optional 50L

ENGINE

MAKE/MODEL 2 x Yamaha F150 DEC's

TYPE four-stroke

WEIGHT 220kg

DISPLACEMENT 2785cc each

GEAR RATIO 1.86:1

PROPELLER 14 ¼ x 18in

MANUFACTURED BY

Cruise Craft Boats

SUPPLIED BY

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“the touch of a button holds you at low RPM right on top of the spot”

LEVEL 1 UPGRADE

Level one of the Helm Master EX incorporates an upgraded stylish digital electronic control with CL5 touchscreen display, as well as the option of an all-new slimline electronic key switch panel with keyless remote.

LEVEL 2 UPGRADE

The second level is the addition of Yamaha's new plug-and-play, bolt-on digital electric steering. Not something new to the industry, however the quietness, smoothness, precision, and customisable steering feel really does make a difference when you compare it to a standard hydraulic. This electronic steering system uses minimum battery capacity as it only draws power when in use. It also eliminates the need for hydraulic pumps, valves, and hoses, removing weight and allowing a nice tidy bilge and transom area.

LEVEL 3 UPGRADE

Level three introduces the new Yamaha Autopilot system with built-in single touch functions. It simplifies navigation, as well as gets you to the destination easier and quicker. Track Point is one of the highlights to this system and when paired with the compatible multi-function display, it allows the vessel to pilot automatically along a set of waypoints and decelerate on arrival at the final destination. Deceleration happens a few hundred metres off to allow for slow entry to your destination point or fishing spot.

LEVEL 4 UPGRADE (THE FINAL)

The final (and best) part of the system includes the full manoeuvrability joystick control. It's a stylish joystick, just like the new binnacle controls. When activated at low speed, the joystick provides simultaneous control



over shift, throttle, and steering, and makes you look like a pro when manoeuvring in tight spots or docking.

Now, the big highlight is no doubt the suite of SetPoint functions coupled to the joystick. FishPoint, DriftPoint, TrackPoint and StayPoint are dedicated functions that will take your positioning over fish or anchor points to the next level.

FISHPOINT

Dedicated to the fishos, the touch of a button holds you at low RPM right on top of the spot. It's like having an electric motor with spot-lock, just without the expense of the electric and batteries to run it. On the F360M with single outboard, it held within one to four metres of the locked spot and that was with gusts of up to 10 knots. There's also a bow up function to hold you bow into the wind or drift. On the twin motors it definitely holds more constant, whereas the single naturally shifts a bit more to compensate in the wind.

DRIFTPOINT

Yet another bonus feature for fishermen as this function enables the bow to be pointed in a set direction, whilst on the drift. When drift fishing you always have the niggles of the boat swinging and having to compensate for it on the controls. Again, the tap of a button and a few fine-tuned tweaks on the stick eliminates all the niggles and perfects your drift.

CRUISE CRAFT EX 720 ST (Explorer 720 Soft Top)

I've tested a number of Cruise Crafts over the years and this 720 weapon is by far one of my favourites. Not new to the range, this currently owned 2011 Cruise Craft 720ST is Yamaha's personal flagship, fitted with twin Yamaha 150's and all the bells and whistles. It's quite the package, and still in great shape.

The open fishability is great and as for performance, well that goes without saying with the twins spanking out a healthy 79.1km/h (42.7kt) at WOT. Hole-shot is lightning fast and throughout the rev-ranges the economy acceptable, considering you are running dual motors. I must say, I am a fan of dual motors, particularly if you're doing long range trips offshore.

Add the Helm Master EX into the mix, and you have the perfect combo for long range trips and of course, superb fishing control when offshore.





TRACKPOINT

This one's a winner allowing you to dot waypoints to suit your ideal drift line on a reef, whilst maintaining the speed and angle of the boat to suit the wind and current. This eliminates the need for a parachute to slow down your drift and the days of lines going under the boat are long gone.

With all these functions, I like the simplicity of operation and precision when fine-tuning everything to suit. Shifting the stick to the desired direction a few times repositions your spot or drift line. Twisting the stick spins the boat and tapping the plus or minus button increases or decreases the thrust. There's also a pattern shift function to control ultra-slow speed, which gently nudges the motor in and out of gear to suit, as well as re-routing functions and more. StayPoint is also accessible to those with multi-engine set ups, to maintain heading and position.

So, as a standard joystick controller you can cruise and control the boat at low speeds with limited effort, along with making manoeuvring and docking in tight spots being far easier. It's clear this system has some serious advantages for fishos.



CRUISE CRAFT F360M

Tested back in 2018, Cruise Craft's locally manufactured F360M centre console took centre stage for its overall design, handling and fishability. Once again, we put it through its paces and although not much has changed, or needed to change design wise, the Yamaha F200 and Helm Master EX most certainly added to its flair.

Performance wise, there was a difference compared to the original Yamaha F175. Hole-shot was nippier, the mid-range at 3500RPM produced a few km/h more speed and slightly better economy, as well as full noise giving a bit more on the top-end.

As another dedicated Yamaha demo boat, the extra bells and whistles and particularly single outboard Helm Master EX, took this centre console to a whole new level. A manageable sized centre console with a blend of good handling, performance, stability, fishability, and of course quality finishes from Cruise Craft.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Helm Master EX isn't just useful for docking, it has great functionality for fishos; Twin Yamaha F150s on the Cruise Craft EX720ST; The neat display is easy to take in at a glance; The end of a good day's testing



Facts & Figures

CRUISE CRAFT F360M

OPTIONS FITTED

- Yamaha F200XCA EFI
- Full boat wrap
- StressFree FreeFall MINI Drum Winch
- SeaDek Flooring
- Helm Master Level 4 Pack including Trim Assist, Pattern Shift, Heading Hold, Course Hold, Fish Point, Track Point, Set Point, Autopilot, full joystick manoeuvrability.
- T-Top by Relaxn including Custom Fibreglass Top
- 110L Cruise Craft Esky
- Lenco Trim Tabs
- Garmin 8416xsv and 1kW Transducer
- Premium Bait Board
- Insulated Kill Tank (Under Casting Platform)
- Live Bait Tank and Saltwater Deck Wash combo
- Extra Pair of Stainless Steel Rod Holders
- Under gunwale strip lighting
- LED spotlight for lighting up back deck
- Transom underwater Lights by Ocean LED
- Upgrade to Easytow Trailer – Paint over Gal

PRICED FROM

\$94,990 with Yamaha F150XB

GENERAL

TYPE Centre Console

MATERIAL GRP

LENGTH 6.35m

BEAM 2.44m

WEIGHT 1990kg including std fuel (210ltrs)

DEADRISE 20 degrees

CAPACITIES

PEOPLE 6

BERTHS N/A

REC. HP 175

MAX. HP 200

FUEL 210L (opt 250L)

WATER RAW N/A

WATER FRESH Optional 50L

ENGINE

MAKE/MODEL Yamaha F200 XCA

TYPE four-stroke

WEIGHT 222kg

DISPLACEMENT 2785cc

GEAR RATIO 1.86:1

PROPELLER 14 ¼ x 17in

MANUFACTURED BY

Cruise Craft Boats

SUPPLIED BY

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CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW TrackPoint lets the system pilot automatically along a line of custom waypoints; SetPoint modes mean there's no need for an extra electric motor; The Helm Master binnacle control; The FishPoint mode will keep the boat right where you want it



“There's also a pattern shift function to control ultra-slow speed, which gently nudges the motor in and out of gear to suit”



The obvious question now is the dent to the bank account, and I most certainly didn't expect this system to be budget orientated as it has a plethora of features and functions attached.

The system for a single 150–300hp DEC engine starts with a RRP of \$9,454.61; this includes the gauge, new control, and digital steering system. If you want to upgrade to the 'full manoeuvrability' kit including Auto Pilot and Joystick, the retail price is \$18,802.74.

The system for an engine with built-in Steering (375–425hp), starts at \$5,507.07 for the digital steering helm, gauge, and control. Upgrading to the 'full manoeuvrability' kit including Auto Pilot and Joystick will set you back \$15,357.30 at RRP.

WRAP

It might seem up there in price, however, there are no budget joystick control systems out there, and none with functions like the Helm Master EX. Again, if budget doesn't allow, you can go through the motions of building the system up over time. Another point to remember is that you are eliminating the costs of a hydraulic steering and electric motor with batteries, which alone can cost \$8,000 to \$10,000 for a 36V system. So, get out there and test the new Helm Master, but be warned as once you try it, there's no turning back as you will want it. 📌