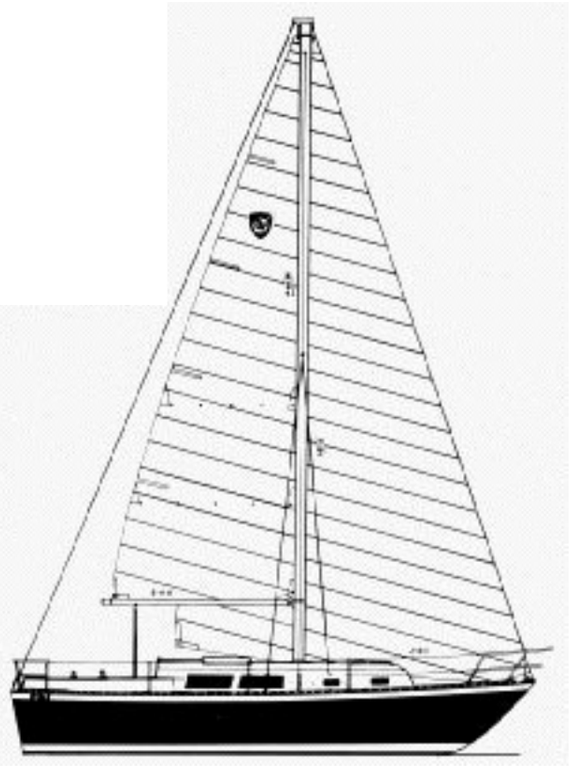
Columbia 8.7

A good entry-level coastal cruiser that offers a large interior volume and long waterline for her length.



Specifications

LOA	28' 7"
LWL	23' 2"
Beam	10' 0"
Draft	4' 8"
Displacement	8,500 lbs.
Ballast	3,500 lbs.
Sail area	424 sq. ft.

The Columbia 8.7 was one of the first of a series of modern small cruisers built by Columbia in the late 1970s. All were given metric length designations to distinguish them from Columbia's older boats, most of which were designed by Bill Tripp. The metric Columbias—the 7.6, 8.7, 9.6, 10.7 and 11.8—were drawn by Alan Payne, the Australian who designed the America's Cup challengers *Gretel* and *Gretel II,* two of the more competitive boats to participate in the Cup races prior to 1983.

Columbia labeled the entire Payne line as "widebody supercruisers," the implication being that the boats were designed exclusively for cruising, and that you were getting more boat per foot of length. In fact, the metric Columbias are a few inches beamier than most other "modern" cruisers of the late 1970s, and quite a bit wider than slightly older-style cruising boats of the same period. By way of comparison, the Cape Dory 28 has a beam of 8' 11"; the Ranger 28, 9' 7"; the Newport 28, 9' 7"; and the Cal 2-29, 9' 3".

The Columbia 8.7 had a checkered production history, spanning more than a decade. After her introduction in 1976, the 8.7 was built by a variety of companies, including Columbia as a division of Whittaker Corporation, Hughes Columbia, and Aura.

As with any boat that has been built by several different companies, opinions vary about who built the best Columbia 8.7. Our owners' surveys do not reveal any definite pattern of superiority among any of the three builders that were involved with the boat: owners of boats from all three companies tend to believe that their boats are better than earlier or later incarnations.

For better or worse, the Columbia 8.7 is modern in appearance, with a very straight sheer, pronounced forward overhang, and no overhang aft. The stern is decidedly unusual, with an exaggerated wineglass-section transom. This reduces the apparent size of the back end of the boat, which would otherwise look very ungainly since beam is carried well aft. From an aesthetic point of view, you either like the stern or you don't.

This is a plain vanilla boat. It has an off-white hull, off-white decks, and off-white non-skid. The only contrast is the aluminum toerail and a very few pieces of exterior teak trim. On the plus side, this means minimum maintenance: on the minus side, it means undistinguished appearance.

As is true of many small cruisers that strive to get more headroom without increasing freeboard to an ungainly height, the Columbia 8.7 has a fairly high,

Owners' Comments

"The Aura Columbia is very well built. I was quite surprised by her speed in anything but the lightest airs. Better livability than any boat her size."

—1984 model in Pennsylvania

"Fittings are OK. Rigging wire size seems light to me. All-teak interior suits me. The bow isn't very high, but fine entry and topside flare keep her dry on deck. The stuffing box is difficult to reach. The boat is a good all-around cruiising boat. I know of one that has been singlehanded from Los Angeles to Hawaii. She steers easily, is fast off the wind, and maneuvers well under power."

—1981 model in Ontario, Canada

"Exceptional space below for a 29-footer. Easy to sail, tracks well."

—1979 model in Minnesota

"The boat is a dog in light air, but does well when the wind is up. She's so stiff that it's tough to bury the rail. A common problem prior to 1978 is profusely leaking ports. Be wary of cracks where the deck and cabin house join: cracks probably mean wet core material."

—1978 model in Virginia

"The interior looks beautiful, but all fasteners are undersized on interior woodwork—they stripped and pulled out. The deck drains to the cockpit can't work—bad design, easily replumbed to through hulls above the waterline. Short berths might be a concern to taller people. Boat contains a lot of sloppy workmanship, most of which is easily corrected."

—1978 model in New York

"The boat is actually faster than I thought it would be. It is not as fast as many other boats of the same length, but this is an acceptable trade-off for comfort in a cruising boat. It has incredible interior space for a boat 28' 7" long. It has turned out to be a very satisfactory boat. Yes. I'd buy it again, and no, I'm not ready to trade up."

—1978 model in New Hampshire

"Poor window design is a notorious Columbia shortcoming. I have yet to find a boat in the same size range that provides as many amenities and as good an accommodation plan in a sound hull. She is well-designed and well-suited for coastal family cruising. She would not be my choice for racing or offshore."

—1977 model in Minnesota

boxy deckhouse. The underwater form of the boat is unusual. It features a double-stepped skeg and bustle, which was a fairly radical way of thinking at the time. The lower skeg eliminates a prop strut, and provides protection for the prop.

Sailing Performance

You might think that a cruising boat designed by one of the more successful 12-meter designers would be a real screamer under sail. But the 8.7 is about 500 to 1,000 pounds heavier than other boats of her size and type, while the rig is about average in size. In winds of below about 10 knots, owners report that the boat is no faster than other boats of her type.

This mediocre light-air performance is borne out by the boat's PHRF ratings. In areas of light air, the boat rates as high as 222; in breezier sailing areas such as San Francisco, the rating drops as low as 192.

One big performance plus is the boat's balance under sail. A large number of owners say the boat is perfectly balanced on all points of sail, and in all wind velocities. Part of this probably stems from the shape of the stern. The pronounced tuck in the stern that creates the wineglass transom also creates a fairly symmetrical waterplane, which stays symmetrical as the boat heels.

The 8.7 is quite stiff. The hull is slab-sided amidships, with a hard bilge turn that is practically a chine. This form provides a lot of initial stability as well as increasing interior volume.

Since the shrouds are set well inboard, headsail sheeting angles can be quite narrow. The genoa track is tucked close alongside the cabin trunk, keeping it out of the way. For reaching, snatch blocks can be attached to the slotted aluminum toerail.

The mainsheet traveler is recessed in the aft end of the bridgedeck at the forward end of the cockpit. This puts the three mainsheet blocks fairly close to the end of the boom, reducing the amount of effort needed to trim the main. The mainsheet is trimmed directly on the traveler using a block and cam cleat. This is a good arrangement for a boat this size. The helmsman can actually reach all the sheets, so the boat can easily be sailed by one person.

Originally, the boat was fitted with a tiller, which comes up through the deck at the aft end of the cockpit. This keeps the cockpit uncluttered. Some later boats were equipped with pedestal wheel steering, which eats up a lot of cockpit space.

There is simply no reason to have wheel steering on a well-balanced boat this size, other than some ego satisfaction that comes from thinking you're

sailing a bigger boat. If you want to sit outboard to see the sails better, get a tiller extension. It's simpler and cheaper to install than a wheel.

You will find different rigs in the boat depending on when and where that particular boat was built, even though all have the same sail plan.

Aura-built 8.7s use a Cinkel rig, the extrusions and fittings of which are almost identical to those of Isomat. Cinkel spars are painted rather than anodized.

The original rig was neither anodized nor painted, so you may find corrosion in an older mast. Very early in the production run, there was a free factory retrofit which modified the masthead shroud tangs. It will be next to impossible to determine if this has been done on any particular mast, so you should carefully examine the masthead for any signs of metal fatigue or unusual wear.

All in all, the 8.7 is well-balanced and well-mannered under sail, though under-powered in light air. The deck layout is fairly performance-oriented, but this works just as well for cruising as it does for racing. The 8.7 was never touted as a racer, and it isn't. But it has very adequate performance for family cruising and daysailing.

Engine

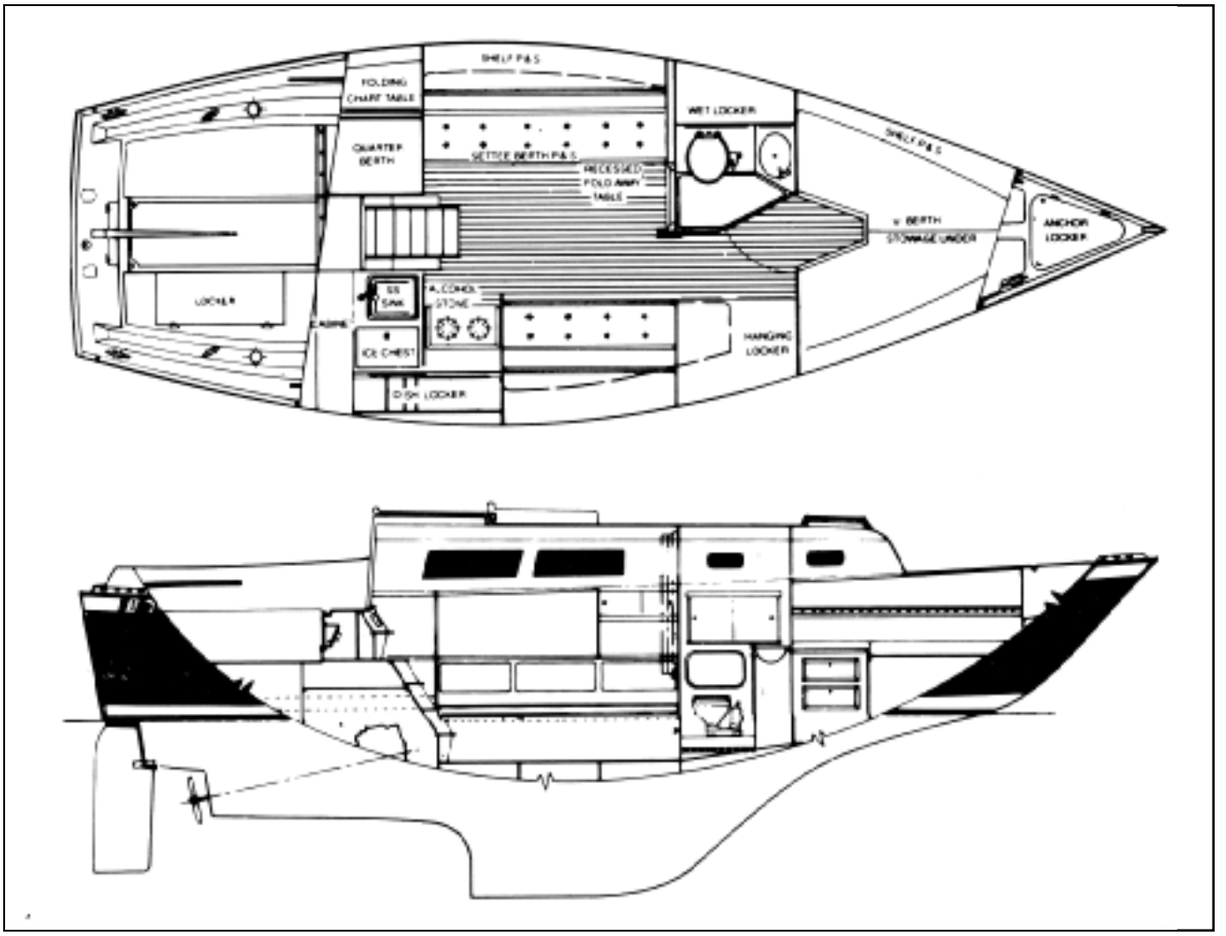
A wide variety of engines have been fitted in the Columbia 8.7. The original engine was the gas Atomic Two, with a Volvo MD6B diesel as an option. Very few boats probably have the Atomic Two. By 1978, the larger Atomic Four gas engine was standard, with the Volvo diesel still an option.

When Hughes Columbia took over production from Columbia, they retained the Atomic Four, but changed the optional diesels to the Volvo MD-7A, with 13 hp, or the Yanmar 2QM15, with 15 hp. A few boats were also fitted with the Yanmar 3GMD, a three-cylinder engine rated at 22.5 hp.

With the Atomic Two, we think the boat would be underpowered by modern standards. Likewise, some owners of the smaller Volvo diesel consider that engine to be a little small.

Engine choice is always a problem, and seems even more so in a small boat like the 8.7. The weight

The interior of the 8.7 is large for a 28 1/2' boat, with plenty of headroom. Ventilation is not very good in older boats, though later 8.7s had opening ports as an option.



of a larger engine can have a negative effect on sailing performance and trim in a small boat, and the greater fuel requirements of a bigger engine reduce cruising range for a given fuel capacity. At the same time, small boats seem really sensitive to being underpowered, particularly when trying to make way into a head sea. The small boat pitches more, losing forward momentum, and always seems to be the wrong size for the wave pattern.

Engine cost is a factor, too. Larger engines cost more than smaller engines. Adding $500 or $1,000 to the price of a 29' boat by putting in a larger engine undoubtedly cost some sales, particularly to first-time buyers who may not have understood the change in performance that may come from an extra 3-5 hp.

In a boat, the difference between 13 hp and 15 hp may mean a difference of a half knot in cruising speed, which can be significant if you're in a hurry to get somewhere. It can mean even more difference in power and speed when bucking a 3' chop and 25-knot headwind.

The Yanmar 2QM15 is probably the best engine choice for the boat. One owner reported breaking two prop shafts when the shaft separated from the coupling in reverse. We have heard of similar problems with some Yanmar engines in other boats from this same period. We suspect the problem is related to early Yanmar engine mounts. Another part of the problem is probably the shaft itself, which is only 3/4" in diameter, and has an unsupported run of about 4' from the transmission to the stuffing box.

Engine instruments are mounted in a recess in the cockpit under the bridgedeck, while controls are mounted on the side of the cockpit well. This is a pretty good location for the instruments on a coastal cruiser, but it would be too close to the cockpit sole for an offshore cruiser that might take a lot of water into the cockpit in severe weather.

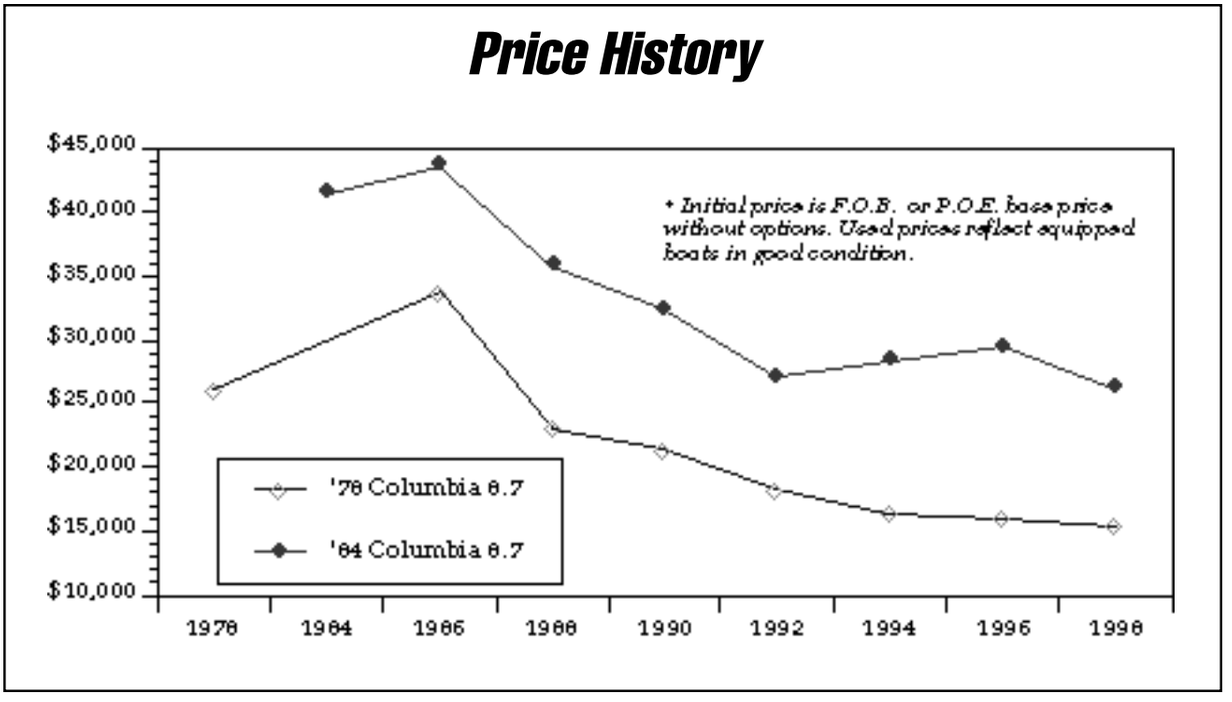
Engine access for service is excellent, although it requires disassembling the engine box behind the companionway ladder.

Construction

Boats from Columbia are known as middle-of-the-road production sailboats. The metric-series boats are different in many construction details from earlier Columbias, but owners' responses to our survey suggest that these later boats were not significantly better or worse than their predecessors.

The Columbia 8.7 hull is an uncored laminate with integral longitudinal stringers. The interior is built up of plywood, rather than based on a fiberglass molding or body pan with wood trim. A plywood interior properly glassed to the hull can add significant stiffness.

Because the plywood interior is a structural component, you must make a careful survey of every secondary bond in the boat. A secondary bond is any bond made after the original hull lamination. In order to achieve strength comparable to the rest of the hull, careful surface preparation and workmanship are required for secondary bonds. Poor secondary bonds are unfortunately not rare in production sailboats, even though there is nothing in our owners' surveys of the 8.7 to suggest that it is either better or worse than any other boat in this respect.



Several owners of early model 8.7s report leaking around non-opening, recessed cabin windows. Leaking ports should show up as water stains on the inside of the teak-veneered cabin trunk. A long-term cure for leaking ports requires complete removal and rebedding: recaulking is at best a temporary fix.

According to our reader surveys, the 8.7 has suffered from a common ailment in the production boatbuilding industry: inconsistency of detailing. Some owners rave about finishing detail such as interior joinerwork and systems installation, some complain about its mediocre quality. Some of these differences are in the eye of the beholder, while others are likely to be real. No production boat, no matter how carefully construction is supervised, will have absolutely consistent quality from one hull to another.

Companionway dropboards and hatch are teak-veneered plywood. While dimensionally stable, teak plywood has to be kept varnished when exposed to the weather, or the veneer will very quickly erode away after a few cleanings.

Owners report that cockpit and deck drainage is a problem. An aluminum toerail can trap water on deck, and improperly-designed cockpit seats can pocket water on the leeward side.

Gelcoat is of typical production boat quality. Some owners report inconsistent gelcoat quality, crazing, and blistering, but the reports are average in frequency.

Another problem mentioned by several owners is rudder delamination. This is fairly common in two-piece rudders, and repair involves cleaning and drying the cracked area, then glassing over it. Merely forcing epoxy or polyester putty into the joint is not a suitable repair. Check for play between the rudder blade and rudder stock at the same time that you examine the rudder blade for flaws.

Interior

A big part of the "widebody supercruiser" concept was to get maximum interior volume in minimum length. The 8.7 achieves this by her slab-sided topsides and wide beam carried well aft. In fact, in both plan view and profile the boat looks like a 31-footer with the stern chopped off.

The interior of the 8.7 is big for a 28 1/2' boat. Main cabin headroom is about 6' 1", and the headroom is carried out almost to the sides of the cabin. The cabin sole slopes upward forward of the mast, so that headroom falls off quickly in the head and forward cabin.

Ventilation belowdecks is poor. As originally built, the boat had three fixed ports per side, and a single aluminum-framed hatch over the forward cabin. There were no cowl vents or opening ports. Opening ports were optional on pre-Aura Hughes Columbia boats, and four opening ports— one each in head and main cabin, two in forward cabin—were standard on Aura boats. Dorade vents over the head and passageway opposite were options on pre-Aura Columbia boats.

Because the original fixed ports were large, odd-shaped, and recessed in the cabin trunk, installing opening ports in older boats is a problem. There is room, however, for a double-opening aluminum-framed hatch over the main cabin between the main hatch and the mast, which would help ventilation in good weather. Cowl vents in dorade boxes can also be installed on either side of the sliding companionway hatch over the aft part of the main cabin.

Because the forward V-berths come almost to a point, they will not be comfortable for two people over 6' tall. With the V-berth insert in place, the entire forward cabin becomes a reasonably large double berth, although you must remove the insert to get to the stowage areas below.

On a boat this size, it makes more sense to make the head the full width of the boat than to try to maintain the big-boat layout of the head off to one side. On the 8.7, the head is still further reduced in size to make it easier to get into the forward cabin. This is not a head compartment for large people.

Opposite the head is a hanging locker and a three-drawer bureau. While drawers waste a lot of space, they are the best way to stow folded clothes. You don't see too many drawers on boats this size. The foot of the starboard settee berth extends forward under the bureau. The backs of both settees swing up and out of the way to make wider berths for sleeping—a good design feature.

Aft of the port settee, there is a quarterberth tucked under the cockpit. Unlike the quarterberths on many small boats, the head of the berth on the 8.7 is not under the cockpit itself, so you won't get claustrophobic. The rudimentary fold-down chart table over the head of the quarterberth is nothing to write home about, but few 28 1/2-footers have anything better. A real nav station ain't usually in the cards on a boat this size.

Pushing the starboard settee forward leaves the starboard aft end of the main cabin free for the galley, and it's really a pretty good galley for a boat this size. A deep single Polar sink is standard—much better than the toy sinks frequently seen on small boats. There is also room for a two-burner gimballed stove with oven, which is a genuine luxury, although you won't find anything but an alcohol stove unless an owner has changed it. Owners comment that the insulation in the icebox leaves something to be desired.

Aft of the sink and icebox is a long locker with sliding doors, plus smaller lockers. All in all, this is a very serviceable galley for a 28' boat.

Despite the lack of ventilation and the relatively dark teak joinerwork, this is a good interior—definitely a major selling point when the boat was introduced. It still looks modern today.

Conclusions

When the Columbia 8.7 was introduced, one of its big selling points was the large interior volume and long waterline for the boat's overall length. In the last decade, the proportions of the 8.7 have become the norm, not the exception, for boats just under 30'.

Frequently, interior volume is one of the things you give up when buying an older boat. The aesthetic of the older small cruiser called for fairly short waterline, long ends, and relatively narrow beam. The Columbia 8.7 and her sisters were not the first boats to feature more volume in less length, but they did it with fewer compromises than a lot of more "modern" cruising boats.

The Columbia 8.7 does not look particularly dated, either inside or out. She is certainly not classic, either, despite what anyone may claim about her unusual stern shape.

Performance is about what you would expect from a small modern cruiser: only fair in light air, lively in breezes over 10 knots. Because of her excellent balance under sail and relative stability, the boat would make a good entry-level coastal cruiser, even for relatively inexperienced sailors. The boat is not handicapped by poor hull shape or bad deck layout, which run rampant in small boats touted as cruisers rather than racers. Unfortunately, the term "cruising sailboat" has become equated with "slow." That is true for a lot of small boats, but it need not be if designer and builder have done their homework.

Columbia has high name recognition, even though its boats were only middle-of-the-road in quality. When you want to sell a Columbia 8.7, you won't get blank stares.If we were shopping for a used 8.7, we'd choose the latest model we could afford. • **PS**