



Survey Says...

7 THINGS EVERY BOAT BUYER SHOULD CONSIDER BEFORE SIGNING A PURCHASE CONTRACT.

story STEVE ZIMMERMAN

Searching for the right boat can be a daunting adventure. First and foremost, a boat must meet your needs with respect to accommodations, performance, appearance and price. Assuming you have found a boat that checks those boxes, the hard work of due diligence begins. And if the due diligence is done well, then you won't find yourself saying later, "I wish I had known that before I bought the boat." With that goal in mind, let's look at seven often-overlooked considerations when buying any kind of boat.

#1 GELCOAT COLOR MATTERS



Gelcoat is a thin, pigmented, resin-rich coating on the outside of the boat. Gelcoat has two functions: to keep the water out of the fiberglass laminate, and to make the boat look pretty. The latter function explains the reason for so many hulls in dark colors such as blue, black, red and forest green.

These dark colors lead to two issues: fading and heat. All gelcoat gradually fades, becoming porous and chalky. The dark colors are particularly susceptible to fading, and they reveal the deterioration more dramatically. Additionally, sunshine on dark hulls creates excessive heat; in direct sun, a dark blue hull might reach 170 degrees Fahrenheit, while a white hull in the same conditions would be about 50 degrees cooler.

That difference affects the interior temperature in southern and tropical climates, and is why buyers need to think about hull color in terms of more than beauty.

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#2 BLISTERS ARE NOT A DEAL KILLER



Discovering blisters on survey day often prompts buyers to walk away—a mistake, in my view.

Blisters certainly need to be addressed, including peeling away the damaged laminates, applying new laminates with vinylester resin, and sealing the result with a barrier coat system. The presence of vinylester matters to a buyer of a new boat, or to the purchaser of a boat that has had blisters repaired, because vinylester resists moisture penetration far better than polyester resin. Keeping the moisture out prevents blisters. The result can be a bottom that is stronger than the original and protected from blisters for 15 years or more.

If you can negotiate a reasonable discount into the post-survey purchase price, then don't let blisters scare you off. And keep in mind that a boat with no blisters might develop them later, depending upon change in location and duration of exposure.

Maybe you are buying a Great Lakes boat that has been kept in cold, fresh water and stored on land each winter. After purchase, the boat moves to Florida, where it stays in warm salt water year-round. After a couple of years, blisters might appear, but a boat that had a blister problem and received the full treatment would be unaffected by the changed conditions.

#3 CHINE SLAP CAN KEEP YOU UP AT NIGHT



Boats with hard chines or low spray rails form a wedge-shaped pocket at the waterline near the bow. At anchor with even a minor chop, the wavelets hit this wedge and make a slap or chunk sound. You not only hear this happen; you often can feel it.

If the boat has a master stateroom in the bow, then the slap can be annoying enough to keep you awake at night. If you have never experienced this condition, then you might want to drop the anchor on the day of the survey and spend a little time in the forward stateroom.

#4 "CAPTAIN MAINTAINED" SOMETIMES MEANS "BUYER BEWARE"



Certainly, a full-time captain with strong technical skills, willing hands and a penchant for detail can keep a boat in outstanding condition. In my experience, however, the words "captain maintained" in a brokerage advertisement often turn out to be a negative.

On boats smaller than 70 feet length overall, the captain is rarely a full-time presence on the boat. Many captains run several boats, showing up when an owner wants to make a trip, and checking on each boat from time to time.

Many repairs are made on the fly to keep the boat running while the owner stays aboard. Resourcefulness and creativity pay off in those situations, solving an immediate problem and keeping the boat moving. Too often, however, these quick fixes become permanent, forgotten until they are discovered on survey day, in bunches.

Additionally, some captains are on a maintenance budget and benefit from keeping costs down—another driver of quick fixes.

#5 CORE MATERIAL MATTERS



If you are buying a composite (fiberglass) boat, then you can count on two things: the hull and/or deck will have core material between fiberglass skins, and there will be elevated moisture found somewhere during the survey.

A good marine surveyor will provide a context for the moisture readings, and guidance on the structural significance. Except when balsa core is involved, even high readings on a moisture meter rarely have structural implications. Establishing the significance of the findings will depend on three considerations: the severity of the readings, the size and number of the affected areas, and the type of core material.

Moisture in the core usually affects value to a greater degree than it affects the strength of the structure. Balsa core provides the exception. If chronically exposed to moisture content on the high range of a meter, balsa core will decompose into something resembling wet cardboard. Once that happens, you are in for extensive, costly repairs.

#6 LOW ENGINE HOURS TELL TWO STORIES



Low engine hours potentially bode well for engine longevity, provided the boat has been maintained well and run primarily at the rated recreational performance load. Engine brand and model matters; some engines have been designed for relatively low hours between rebuilds (6,000 hours, for example), while others have been engineered for much higher spans (10,000 hours, for example).

But exceptionally low engine hours tell another story, one about a boat that has had very light use. During the first few months to a year of ownership with a former "marina queen," you should be prepared for sporadic failures of system components: head vacuum pump, air conditioning condenser, generator exhaust riser and so on.

Previous light use doesn't mean you shouldn't buy the boat, but it does mean you will need some time aboard before heading off on a long trip, and some room in the budget.



Cruising boats have a surprising amount of hose. A 40-foot trawler might have 200 or 300 feet or more of fuel, sanitation, engine, hydraulic and seacock hoses. Fuel fill hose costs roughly \$20 per foot, while good sanitation hose will come closer to \$30 per foot. And replacing hoses can be shockingly time consuming. Just imagine the run of sanitation hose from a tank in the bilge through cabinetry and up to the deck.

Most of us don't replace hoses until they fail, but they do have a service life that varies depending on the hose type and application. While 20-year-old hoses can still be in use, 10 years should be your benchmark, and less than that for hoses on the engine and generator.

Replacing all the hoses on a 40-foot trawler might cost \$20,000—money well spent, but likely more than you thought about on survey day.

THE UPSHOT

Any boat post-purchase will present some surprises and challenges. With careful forethought and an excellent survey, you will minimize those unknowns and be prepared for what the boat will need.

Once you have bought the boat, there is one more test that every boat should pass. When you drop the anchor and head out in the dinghy, if you find yourself gazing back at the boat with a good feeling, then you have chosen well.

If you make a full circle around the boat to admire it before heading ashore, then you get bonus points. ✨

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