

The following are excerpts from the June 2009 article, "Do-It-Yourself Boatyards" from Practical Sailor. The complete article and subscriptions to Practical Sailor can be found at: <http://www.practical-sailor.com/>

(Eldean Shipyard allows the do-it-yourselfer the freedom to work on their own boat)

Do-It-Yourself Boatyards

The cost of buying, owning, and maintaining a sailboat has spiraled to an all-time high. The ranks of entry-level sailors, starting out in smaller boats, are thinning, and if both the industry and the consumer aren't careful, mid-sized keelboat sailing will once again become an activity relegated to those of means.

For many sailors, survival at sea has become a cash flow issue rather than a test of seamanship, and through do-it-yourself efforts, they have managed to keep the dream alive. There's a three-fold approach to cost-effective boating: Buy a sound but older boat, keep it on a mooring rather than in a costly marina, and find a boatyard that's user friendly to the "do-it-yourselfer."

As boat owners contend with more and more boatyard restrictions on what projects an owner can do, yard owners are facing pricing pressures that are exacerbated by escalating taxes, labor costs, and insurance premiums. These hardships have caused many a yard owner to throw in the towel and sell off to developers who have no intention of recapitalizing a boatyard—or even using the property in a "water dependent" context.

The Business Side

It's important to keep in mind that boatyards are a for-profit business and a nautical rendition of fair trade should include good service for a reasonable fee. It's not unreasonable to expect the yard's staff to have a well-maintained Travelift, Brownell trailer, railway, or crane to haul your boat. The operator should be skilled and by reflex should be able to get the slings properly positioned and your boat safely blocked.

Boatyards are in the business of selling labor, and their profitability revolves around keeping craftsmen busy. A yard that's willing to allow boat owners to do their own work is in some ways constricting its profitability, and the owner who tries to sneak in a subcontractor is "biting the hand that feeds." Most yards have a service charge that applies to subcontracted work—some even encourage it—but whatever the case, owners that attempt to fly under the radar with owner-hired, incognito subcontractors have led many yards to clamp down on the DIY option and mandate that all work is handled through the yard.

The win-win strategy that will help maintain boat owners' ability to do their own work is developing a good working relationship with the yard staff. The guy who comes into the shop asking to use tools and wondering where the "scrap" teak and stainless steel are kept does little to evoke a favored customer relationship. The DIYer who hires the yard to handle repairs and installations beyond his own skill and ability and develops a friendly relationship with the crew becomes a goodwill ambassador for all self-reliant sailors.

Picking the Right Boatyard

The trend toward establishing boatyards on the least desirable parcels of land has caught on, and many are packed like a sardine and smell worse thanks to adjacent sewage-treatment facilities. Finding a nice place to work, with friendly folks to share a break with, is a luxury indeed.

Equipment & Operator Skill

Frayed lifting slings, deteriorated pilings, and rusty machinery may still work, but more often than not, they are signs of the overall quality of workmanship that a boatyard has to offer. Those seeking lowest-cost options need to be especially aware of how their boat will be hauled and handled. When all is said and done, it's hard to beat a new or well-maintained Travelift or hydraulic trailer. Equally important is the dock or ramp it operates on. But no matter how good the gear, the skill of the operator is the most important variable of all.

With sailboats, sling placement is crucial, and the geometry of the hull shape in conjunction with the cable lead adjustability on the lift will determine how equal the sling loading will be. Also critical is the cable angle, a factor that can lead to sling slippage, and in extreme cases, a vessel being dropped. A skilled operator will know how to handle various hull shapes and what rigging must be undone to fit a vessel into the confines of a Travelift's web.

Services

Well ahead of time a boat owner should work out with the yard manager what projects he wants the staff to shoulder and which ones he will be doing himself. Despite good intentions and prearrangements, most refits, even modest ones, lead to new discoveries and more work. Seldom does one find less to fix than originally planned. This is where the DIYer can make or break a relationship with a boatyard and the art of spending refit dollars efficiently is truly tested.

By noting in advance the skills of the craftsmen in the boatyard, you know whether or not appropriate expertise is available. However, fitting in more work can be a problem, especially during the spring rush. That's why scheduling a haulout date after the fleet has been launched makes good sense. Also keep in mind that pestering a pro is—in a boatyard context—being a very "bad neighbor," and just like asking where the "grab-bag" of scrap teak is kept, overbearing persistence hurts all do-it-yourselfers in the long run.

The Heart of The Yard

Working with boatyards that allow the do-it-yourselfer to thrive is a two-way street, and sailors need to do their part by making sure these boatyards remain a part of the ever-changing waterfront.

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