



# Winter Storage

By Jerome A. Koncel

**A**lthough it's warm, sunny and breezy right at the moment, boaters know that winter is fast approaching, so now's the time to start planning for winter storage. Boaters need to decide on the boat storage method that best fits their needs and pocketbooks.

There are basically four types of winter storage: self-storage, or park it by the side of your house or backyard and wrap it in something to protect it from the elements; public self-storage; outside boatyard storage, where boats are kept safe, secure and in shrinkwrap; and indoor storage.

The first three choices are straight forward, so let's take a more detailed look at heated indoor storage.

## OPTIONS AVAILABLE

It used to be that indoor boat storage was confined to unheated buildings, but not any more. Indoor heated storage is becoming much more common and is no longer an exclusive option for boaters.

Boaters who choose heated indoor storage do so for safety, security and to protect their boats from the elements, but they also view this time as an opportunity to have work

done on their boats. For these people, repair and storage go hand-in-hand, and they are very loyal to those businesses that provide good customer service. Why? Because their boats are not just pieces of equipment, but rather prized possessions, and there are only a few people they trust with their valuable assets.

When it comes to winter storage, no two facilities are alike. Some require boaters to reserve their times for pullouts and putbacks. Others tell boaters to come when they want. The standard method for hauling boats out and returning them to the water are marine travelifts, although overhead cranes are not uncommon and forklifts and mobile storage units seem to be essential.

Engine winterization is standard practice at some facilities, an option at others. Some facilities checkout boats before they're stored, present a checklist of "action items" to customers and then perform routine and special maintenance work, ranging from doing cosmetic repairs of small scratches to repowering boat engines. Some storage businesses allow boaters to do "some work" on their boats, while others require all work to be done by "their certified marine techs."

Prices vary according to boat size, storage location, whether the mast is up or down on sailboats and "the hometown discount" for those customers also storing their vessels

at the marina's slips in the summer. Businesses charge by multiplying length x width x sq. footage rate. There's even a difference here as to whether it's LoA or standard specs.

Finally, some facilities only store powerboats, some store both sailboats and powerboats, some only store sailboats. Some businesses use a computer template to store boats, others use racks, and still others fit as many boats as they can. So, let's highlight some heated storage facilities.

### CHICAGO HARBOR SYSTEM

A relative newcomer to the winter storage ranks, the Chicago Harbor System is in its third year of offering winter storage, but now offers inside heated storage at its new 31st Street harbor.

*The indoor facility is a "green project" that uses lake water to heat the facility and has five feet of green growth on the rooftop. While it accepts both powerboats and sailboats at its indoor storage, the maximum height of the mast on the keel can only be 15 feet. As part of its contract, the Chicago Harbor System washes the boat's bottom before storing it away and provides boat stands or a boat cradle at no cost.*

A new offering this year is repair service. The Chicago Harbor System has contracted with Skipper Bud's to perform boat repairs for its customers, adding another convenience for customers.



### OSELKA'S MARINA

New Buffalo, Mich., has more than 1,000 boats docked in its harbor during the summer boating season, and Oselka Marina stores 350 of them: 100 outdoor, 100 in unheated buildings and 150 in heated indoor storage.

The marina prides itself in safely hauling out boats with an experienced crew. "We break our crews up into teams that specialize on various storage activities, such as haulouts, engine winterization, shrinkwraps, and so forth," said Mark Oselka, service manager. He adds that the marina includes winterization of engines, air conditioners, and generators, as well as powerwashing in its seasonal fee.





Oselka's biggest challenge is coordinating schedules so that boats are put away in a timely fashion. "As hard as we try, it always seems there's a crunch to store boats," said Oselka. But for boaters in New Buffalo, Oselka Marina offers a winter package that eliminates the storage line. "For people who dock with us or in the New Buffalo environs, we will pick up their boats and take them to our facilities at no cost," said Oselka. He adds that boaters who use the marina's slips in the summer and storage in the winter also receive either pricing discounts or repair credits.

### CHICAGO YACHT YARD

Located on the Chicago River only a few miles from downtown Chicago, Chicago Yacht Yard offers 300,000 sq. ft. of indoor heated storage for between 500 to 550 boats depending on their size.

Rob Hannah, managing partner, says one thing that separates his business from others is the breadth of repair services it offers to customers. "There is nothing we can't or won't do for our customers when it comes to repairing their boats," he said. He added that the business also charges customers according to the boat's specified length, not LoA.

Chicago Yacht Yard uses two 125,000-pound cranes to haul out boats and put them back in the spring. It also uses full-time employees to move boats in and out of the water. "We haven't had any boat haulout damages in the last 10 years," Hannah said. A major reason for this is the experienced crews headed by an operations manager with more than 41 years of experience operating cranes.

Hannah said his storage business experienced a drop off in the 2008-2010 period, but is doing quite well this year. "We're seeing an uptick in our business and in the industry as a whole," said Hannah.

### ELDEAN'S SHIPYARD

Eldean's Shipyard, Macatawa, Mich., is a leader in indoor heated storage and today offers 150,000 sq. ft of space in seven separate heated storage buildings. "Our customers come from all over the Great Lakes, including New Buffalo, Chicago, and even Racine and Kenosha (Wis.)," said Matt Eldean, co-owner, Eldean Shipyard.

The shipyard is pro-active in helping boaters enjoy the boating lifestyle. In addition to a seasonal contract, customers receive a list of repair options they can have done and check off which ones they want done, ranging from winterization to complex mechanical repairs of engines, generators, and so forth. It also offers boaters who store their boats in the summer and winter at Eldean's some repair credits and discounts.

Because all of its storage facilities are indoor heated, the business does not have a scheduling problem with haulouts. "We don't give boaters a date for dropping off their boats, but rather tell them to drop it off here at their convenience, and we'll put it into storage," said Eldean.

### CROWLEY'S YACHT AND STORAGE YARD, LLC

On the southeast side of Chicago sits one of the largest sailboat storage businesses in the country. Crowley's offers four storage buildings that were built in the 1980s for storage and caters primarily to sailboaters. It prides itself on being home for boaters year-round noting that 80 percent of the boaters who store their vessels here in the summer also use the business for winter storage.





Grant Crowley, managing partner for Crowley's Yacht and Storage Yard, describes his business as "a full-service business," and this is where challenges crop up. He explains that some boaters ask Crowley's to perform repair work on their vessels that are 25 to 30 years old, and there are no parts available for them. "In many cases, the builders are no longer in existence," he said. When this occurs, Crowley's will either build the parts themselves or outsource them.

Like Eldean's, Crowley's will inspect their customers' vessels and invariably will discover some needed repairs, such as an old hose or fuel pump or generator that doesn't work properly. It will perform these repairs after receiving the customer's approval of written repairs and estimates.

## NORTHPORT BAY BOAT YARD

In the heart of Grand Traverse Bay, Mich., lies Northport Bay Boat Yard, whose winter storage and repair operation has bucked the economic trend of the past four years. The business has been full for the past five years, has grown by

acquiring the next door storage facility (Gull Lake Marine) in 2010, and is looking to add employees while others are laying them off.

Rae Ellen Thyer, owner of the business, said the boatyard offers 85,000 sq. ft. of indoor storage in 17 different buildings, both heated and unheated. The boatyard's biggest challenge is optimizing storage space. "It's just not a question of fitting boats into buildings," said Thyer, "it's also whether the boat needs to be repaired and how soon the owner wants the vessel in the water in the spring."

To entice people to have repair work done during the winter, Thyer offers a reduced hourly rate for its mechanical work, and adds that all repair work is done in heated facilities. The rate drops to \$70 per hour compared to \$85 in the summer.

## CHOOSING YOUR OPTION

Winter is coming soon, but boaters have many options when it comes to winter storage. The key is to select which one is best for their lifestyle and wallet.

