



On the Hill

A boat on the hard shouldn't require a money tree.
By Vincent Daniello

here's no use in sugarcoating it. Boats are expensive. We've all heard the jokes — *BOAT: an acronym for break out another thousand; a hole in the water into which one pours money; etc.*, though the best reminder may be the bottom line of the annual boatyard bill. But yard trips

don't have to become a battle over dollars and delays. In fact, going into the yard prepared and with the right attitude can be downright pleasant and might even save you a buck or two.

"Some guys have a budget and a completion time in mind, but not a clear idea of what they want to have repaired," says Ralph Heil, president of Thunderbolt Marine outside Savannah, Georgia (thunderboltmarine.us). He finds this such a deterrent to effective scheduling, as well as a primary source of ill feelings later, that he won't haul a boat until the work is defined. "The large yachts with professional crew usually know what they need," he says. For owner-operated boats, Heil suggests starting with a recent survey or giving his team a few hours aboard to check things over and prepare

Know what is included in the yard's quotes, such as prepping the running gear before the bottom paint is applied.



a punchlist of suggested repairs.

Most yards don't undergo such meticulous planning, but boat owners certainly should. "Leaving anything to guesswork is dangerous," says Jimmy Hone, longtime captain of yachts from 55 to 198 feet. "Even the most reputable yards will, at least unintentionally, take advantage if you miss something." Hone insists on clear details in bids — not just a bottom job, but the type of paint, how many coats, pre-paint prep, whether the price includes running gear, bow thruster, stabilizers and even what zincs cost, installed.

"The cheapest quote usually isn't the best," Hone says. "A yard can't stay in business that way." A yard that's desperate for business might intentionally quote low but expect to make up its losses on additional work once the boat is captive. Since additional repairs inevitably come up, Hone suggests comparing labor rates and material prices between yards, not just the bottom line of quotes. Also be clear on policies regarding quotations versus estimates versus just an educated guess.

"Check the reputation of the yard," says Roy Merritt, vice president of Merritt's Boat & Engine Works in Pompano Beach, Florida (merrittboat.com). "Word gets around pretty quickly." Merritt also suggests bypassing the air-conditioned office for a tour of the yard. "Some people can do a lot with a little. Others can't get it right with the best equipment in the world," he says. "What shape is their equipment in? How is the Travelift maintained?"

Try also to gauge the pace of work: Few boats and a skeleton crew? A full yard but seemingly not enough help? Either warrants further inquiry but also offers opportunities to save. "I'll give a

different price for work at the beginning of August than I will for September," Heil says. "I'd rather break even than send guys home." At Thunderbolt, the period January through March is typically slow, but this varies by geography.

Both Merritt and Heil warn that a yard with a good reputation for one type of work, perhaps topside painting, might be the wrong choice for other work, like running gear alignment or electrical upgrades. "I wonder if people see the big towers and fancy sport-fishing boats and say, 'That's not the place for me,'" Merritt says. Only 60 percent of Merritt's work is on sport-fishing boats — perhaps 10 percent are boats he or his father and uncle built. "See how comfortable the yard is with the scope of the work you want to do."

Also consider length overall. "A 112 Westport used to be a big boat, but now you might take that to a yard full of 150-footers. You become a small fish in a big pond," Hone says. He also warns that too big a boat might overwhelm a yard's equipment or resources.

Often it's best to seek out a yard that specializes in a specific type of work. On sport-fishers, for instance, simple jobs like mounting an antenna on the top of a tuna tower or replacing a trim tab recessed into the hull require special knowledge. "I go almost exclusively to Merritt's," says Rob Ruwitch, owner of a Stuart-built custom 46-foot Kincheloe-Nickerson sport-fisher. "They always take good care of me. They're expensive. They all are, but I know the job is done right."

Projects can grow beyond the planned scope. "We're getting to the point where we're replacing major systems," Ruwitch says of his 20-year-old boat. "Parts might no longer be available. When we replaced the steering system, the components had different mounting footprints and hole patterns," he says, which added time and expense required to modify [the] helms and brackets in the lazarette. "The adage when starting a business is that it will require twice as much money and take twice as long as anticipated. If you have that same understanding going into the boatyard, you'll have a much better experience," Ruwitch says.

Ruwitch's boat is an extreme example. Heil budgets Thunderbolt's resources assuming 30 percent more work on each boat than originally bid. At many yards a

50 percent increase isn't abnormal.

Owners sometimes cause problems. "A guy might know we're very busy, so he says he just wants a bottom job when he has a lot more work in mind all along," Merritt says. Unplanned work can overtax the yard's resources and delay many boats.

Independent contractors are another variable that can often save the client money but at the same time may create issues. "The yard can pull employees

off another job or pay them overtime," Hone says. "A subcontractor might be busy on another job in another yard." Warranty is also a consideration. "It's something to be aware of, not necessarily something to be wary of," Hone says. He suggests that vetting key subcontractors well is always wise.

Hone prefers having the yard hire and pay outside contractors, with the clear understanding that the yard is responsible

See What You're Trying To Miss

It doesn't matter why you're on the water at night; it's still nerve-wracking, even for experienced boaters.

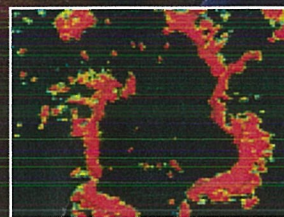
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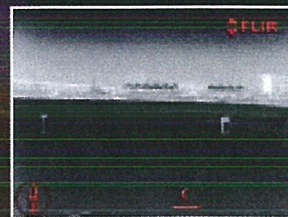
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for the job. On the other hand, he negotiates beforehand to allow contractors that he has long-term direct relationships with — such as engine mechanics — into the yard without adding a fee.

Ask in advance too about reduced-rate semiskilled laborers for basic jobs — offered at Thunderbolt for about 60 percent of skilled-labor rates. “We take full responsibility for their management, their actions and their insurance,” Heil says.

Although it’s wise to shop around, good long-term relationships benefit all. Knowing the boat helps yards quote more accurately. “When the boat is coming back, we’re not tempted to do as much as we can on each visit,” Heil says. He prefers to schedule work that isn’t quite ripe by planning the next yard visit before the boat is launched.

When jobs don’t go as planned or yard bills turn ugly, Merritt and Heil stress communication. “Sometimes I’ll negotiate,” Heil says. “Our primary goal is repeat business from satisfied clients.”

“Talk to the supervisor of the job,”



Tell the yard where the bow thruster, keel or stabilizers are to avoid damage during a haul-out.

Merritt says. “Get a clear explanation of what the work was.” Merritt itemizes each job on invoices to show where time and money went. Remember in the end that

boats are expensive. Among many tongue-in-cheek adages, Ernest Hemingway offered perhaps the most eloquent: “The longer I fish the poorer I’ll be.” □

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