



Buying a Used Sailboat

Adam Cort - January 19, 2016

HOW TO SPOT A BARGAIN

To spot a “bargain,” or if not a bargain then at least a boat worth owning, take the asking price, add on how much it will cost to ensure the boat is safe and functional, and see how that figure compares to similar boats on the marketplace. If it is substantially higher, you need to talk the current owner down or look for another boat.

Calculating the true cost of a bargain takes time. Start by learning as much as possible about boat maintenance. Read as many books on the subject as you can.

After doing your homework, inspect as many old boats as you can, ideally multiple examples of the boat you have in mind. At the very least, spend some time wandering around boatyards. The more boats you see, the better idea you’ll have of what you’re looking at.

When inspecting boats, bring a flashlight for looking into various nooks and crannies. Take notes, too. Look for both major problems that require lots of time and money to fix and smaller problems that might not be deal-breakers but may cause a substantial headache (see sidebars). Don’t forget that even if you’re willing to live with a particular problem, potential buyers down the road might not be.

Don’t make the mistake of underestimating the cost of fixing the “little things” wrong with a boat; same goes for older gear that is still “functioning” but needs to be replaced. While a few minor repairs might not seem daunting, a whole laundry list can be both time-consuming and costly. A new mainsail cover, for example, will cost \$30 per foot of boom, while a new dodger for a 30-footer will run you \$1,900, minimum. To have the yard install a new head and holding tank will likely cost \$2,500, while replacing something as “simple” as the foot pump on the galley sink will be around \$500. A complete set of cushions down below for a 30-footer will cost you \$4,000 or so.

If the boat is already priced so low that adding in these costs still makes it a bargain, great. Otherwise, walk away if the seller isn’t prepared to negotiate.



DO YOU NEED A PROFESSIONAL SURVEY?

If you're handy and are only looking to buy a sailing dinghy or center boarder costing \$2,000 or less, then by all means try to go it alone. But if you're in the market for anything bigger or costlier, you should have professional help when inspecting a boat.

As a purely practical matter, a professional survey is required if you need financing and/or insurance for the boat. Equally important, a professional marine surveyor can provide an objective view of the boat you have fallen in love with. It's not the job of a surveyor to tell you what to do or how to proceed. However, a good surveyor will make you fully aware of what you're getting into. As part of the survey, you will also receive an estimate of the boat's true market value, which is a useful negotiating tool.

"Every owner is going to tell you their boat is perfect and well maintained, but that's just not the case. If you don't do surveys for a living you just don't know what to look for," says Marian Lambrecht, who operates Schuss Marine Services on Lake Michigan.

Norm LeBlanc, a surveyor based in Danvers, Massachusetts, agrees, noting that a marine surveyor provides an effective reality check for buyers caught up in the excitement of a possible purchase. "The buyer is wearing rose-colored glasses. I'm the one who doesn't have them on," he says.

A good surveyor can also serve as a practical adviser with respect to the boat market in general and the cost of fixing problems he finds. "I really enjoy talking with people and giving verbal advice," LeBlanc says. "I also always encourage customers to accompany me on a survey, so I can help educate them on what they're looking at."

Surveys typically cost around \$15-\$20 per foot of LOA. There may be additional fees for things like travel. Figure to spend somewhere around \$600 for a survey of a typical 35-footer. This may sound like a lot, but it pales in comparison to the cost of an unexpected major repair job.

To find a good surveyor, ask around. If a friend has had a good experience with a particular surveyor, give him or her a call. Don't be afraid to ask for references. A good surveyor with nothing to hide will be happy to oblige.

The Society of Accredited Marine Surveyors (SAMS) and the National Association of Marine Surveyors (NAMS) both offer marine surveyor accreditation programs in an effort to separate the wheat from the chaff. (Lambrecht and LeBlanc, are both accredited.) However, surveyors are not required by law to be accredited. Working with an accredited surveyor makes a lot of sense, but a non-accredited surveyor with a sterling reputation may be just as good.



WORKING WITH A BROKER

Many sailors shy away from brokers and would rather deal face-to-face with a boat's previous owner. This may work when buying a smaller, less expensive boat, but a good broker—whether a seller or buyer's broker—fulfills an important role in the boat-buying process.

From the seller's perspective, a broker provides a number of services, from fielding calls, organizing advertising and showings, to ensuring the boat is ready for market. However, a good seller's broker provides benefits for the buyer as well.

The go-between: A broker serves as a buffer between the parties engaged in the transaction. Boats can be very emotional things. A broker is far less likely than an owner to fly off the handle if you say the boat in question is not the most perfect thing afloat you've ever seen.

A filter: A good broker also serves as a filter. Representing a boat that nobody in their right mind would want to own is a waste of a broker's time.

Paperwork: A good broker will help you negotiate the paperwork and formalities leading up to a successful transaction. A broker can also hold funds in escrow as the transaction is progressing.

As with surveyors, a broker's business is largely word of mouth. Some states, like Florida and California, regulate the brokerage business, but elsewhere all it takes to call yourself a boat broker is a business card. Ask around. If you don't like what you see or hear, go elsewhere.

Of course, the downside to dealing with a seller's broker is that he or she is working for the other side. The solution, then, is to retain a buyer's broker, someone who will look out solely for your best interests.

Like a good marine surveyor, a good buyer's broker can provide additional insight into both your boat and the market in general to ensure you end up with the boat you want. Brokers talk each other's language, often know or have heard about each other, and may be more willing to share information with one another than they would with just a buyer. Brokers also have access to professional databases that can help determine if a boat is competitively priced.

In addition, a buyer's broker is typically an experienced sailor, and as such can provide lots of background on a type of boat or specific boat you are interested in.

In the words of Rich Stearns, owner of Chicago-based J/Boats Midwest and Stearns Boating LLC: "A good broker knows boats and whether a boat will match your sailing style. A survey won't tell you if a boat is no fun to sail."

Best of all, a buyer's broker doesn't cost you anything. He or she makes money by getting half the 10 percent commission the seller's broker would have earned if they'd sold the boat to a buyer without representation.

The one catch is that a buyer's broker is typically only interested in larger transactions. Ten percent of a \$4,000 purchase price is only \$400, and half of that isn't worth a top-notch broker's time and effort. If, however, you're in the market for a boat costing \$15,000 and up, you should have little trouble finding a good broker who can help you.



MAJOR PROBLEMS

These are all potential deal-breakers, in the sense that repair costs are high enough that they will make a “bargain” boat far more expensive than the asking price. Put a couple of these together, and they could easily cost more than the boat itself.

Leaks: Topside leaks can spring from a number of sources, including portlights, the mast partners, a bad hull-to-deck joint, and through-bolts where winches, cleats and other hardware have been installed. A continual ingress of water can lead to other problems, some of them major, including rotting deck core or bulkheads.

Spongy decks: A leaking deck will often be soft. Spongy decks result when water gets into the core of a deck laminate, causing it to rot and/or separate from the fiberglass. Even a small, soft area will require a sizeable effort to repair.

Engine problems: If you have any reason to doubt the state of a boat’s auxiliary engine, do so. A couple of warning signs: a poorly kept engine space and no maintenance record. If the owner has been taking proper care of the engine, it will show.

Chainplate corrosion: If you see any sign of corrosion around chainplate fittings, assume the worst. Crevice corrosion occurs when wet stainless steel is deprived of oxygen, most commonly where you can’t see it, for example where chainplates contact the hull. Even a little bit of rust may mean there is a big problem.

Rig problems: If even a single stay or shroud has a loose strand of wire, you may need to change out all the standing rigging, especially if you plan to sail offshore. Carefully inspect all swaged fittings for corrosion and cracking. Look for galvanic corrosion on aluminum masts and booms wherever there are stainless steel parts or fasteners. Also be sure to look for any dents or kinks in spars.

Keel and rudder corrosion: On a fin-keel boat any sign of rust where the keel meets the hull is a sign the keel bolts may be compromised. Any rust or water dripping from the rudder after the boat has been hauled means water has penetrated to the stainless steel or aluminum framework inside the rudder blade.

Blisters: In most cases osmotic blisters are a manageable problem, but in some cases they are not. If the boat you’re examining has only a few, the problem is likely cosmetic. However, if there are extensive blisters, the heart of the laminate may be structurally compromised—likely a major and very expensive fix.

Hull damage: Major hull damage includes any scratches or holes that penetrate to the heart of the laminate or to the core material in a cored hull. In the latter case you are looking at a major repair job, in which all wet material must be ground out and then replaced to ensure the structural integrity of the hull.

Cracked bulkheads and stringers: Any sign of a damaged structural member should raise a major red flag. A sailboat hull functions as an integral whole, and the fact that the basic skeleton is failing is a sign of misuse, poor maintenance, poor design or poor construction.

Suspect electrical system: Take a look behind the electrical panel alongside the nav station. Do you see a well-organized harness with crimped and sealed connectors, or a rat’s nest? Poor wiring is a potential fire hazard and will definitely make things harder for you when it comes time to sell if you haven’t rectified the situation.

Odor: Not only is a smelly boat a boat that has likely been poorly maintained, it can also be the sign of a major repair job. The smell of raw sewage, in particular, should be a red flag.



THIS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Although these problems won't make a boat unusable, fixing them can be surprisingly expensive. Even if you decide to bear with them, they will undoubtedly make the boat that much harder to sell down the road.

Through hulls: Make sure all through hulls are of the right type (quarter-turn valves) and functioning smoothly.

Hoses and clamps: Check all hoses and clamps leading to the engine, through hulls and plumbing. A single incorrectly installed hose can send your boat to the bottom if it fails.

Sails: Be sure to inspect these thoroughly. Take them out of their bags, run the edges and spread them out to look for holes, repairs, mildew and worn stitching.

Canvas: Don't take your canvas for granted. Whether it's a dodger, a bimini or a mainsail cover, broken zippers, corroded snaps and rotten material constitute a real problem. If you don't believe me, just ask the guy looking to buy your boat a few years from now.

Water damage below:

Even if it isn't structural, damage to bulkheads, the cabin sole and any woodwork will take a lot of time and/or money to repair.

Running rigging: Good running rigging makes sailing safer and more enjoyable. Don't make the mistake of thinking you can "get by" with ratty old gear.

Miscellaneous gear: One of the great things about buying a used sailboat is all the accumulated gear that comes with it. But be sure it's in good working condition. A pile of junk is just that.