

Discussing with a dealer your angling style and wish list of features will help him find and equip a fishing boat that's perfect for you.

MAKE IT YOURS

25

Steps to Buying and Equipping
Your Ultimate Fishing Boat

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YOU'VE SQUARED AWAY THE FINANCING, and the time has finally come to buy a boat, be it new or just new to you. You're all a-jitter with the idea of selecting and equipping a boat that's perfect for your kind of fishing. But before you sign on the dotted line, let's look at 25 important steps you should take to ensure that this becomes your ultimate saltwater-fishing boat.

WITH OUTBOARDS, YOU CAN VARY THE NUMBER OF ENGINES AND HORSEPOWER. NOTHING'S MORE DREADFUL THAN AN UNDER-POWERED BOAT, SO DON'T SKIMP ON HORSES.

1 Review Expenses: Though you might think only in terms of purchase price, consider ongoing expenses such as slip fees, insurance, maintenance and fuel. Too many buyers have eagerly upgraded to bigger boats, only to pine for their smaller craft once the costs of running a new boat hit them. Create an accurate estimate of ongoing expenses; although you might not change your mind, at least you'll go in with your eyes and your checkbook open.

2 Consider the Seas: Size matters if you're running offshore. So if the choice boils down to two or three extra feet in length, opt for the bigger boat, especially if you anticipate serious blue-water fishing. You'll truly appreciate the upgrade when battling mean, green, foaming seas miles offshore or running a windswept inlet on an outgoing tide.

3 Explore Hull Choices: V-hulls still dominate the sport-fishing market, but power catamaran designs continue to gain popularity, thanks to traits such as stability, fuel efficiency and a smooth ride in choppy seas. Although you might have your heart set on a V-hull, schedule a test drive in a comparable power cat before you make a final decision.

4 Determine Your Range: Will you have enough range to reach the fish? The answer lies in a simple equation: Fuel capacity in gallons multiplied by miles per gallon equals range in miles. Capacity is easy to get, but mpg might be tough to get without actually running the fully equipped boat. The builder or dealer might provide

► Ask the dealer about the cruising range, but confirm that estimate with owners of the same boat-and-motor package.



an estimate, but ask existing owners to confirm actual mpg. Some builders offer additional fuel capacity as an option, and you might need that.

5 Look In-Depth: If shallow-water trips are part of your fishing, check the draft of the hull. Manufacturers' specs reflect the draft at rest with the outboard motor tilted up, and no fuel, gear or people in the boat. That will change once the outboard is down and with the boat fully loaded. For a better idea of draft, ask for a measurement with the outboard down. Also, remember that draft will increase when accelerating from a standing start but decrease when on plane.



6 Ponder Your Power: Most big sport-fishers come with twin diesels, but center-consoles and walkarounds often have outboard motors. Still, there are variations. With inboards, you can order different horsepower or brands, as well as different drives — straight-shafts, pods and sometimes sterndrives. With outboards, you can vary the number of engines and horsepower. Nothing's more dreadful than an underpowered boat, so don't skimp on horses. Experienced owners can offer advice on different power configurations.

7 Sleep on It: Some anglers return to port at the end of each day, and others like the idea of spending the night at distant anchorages on multiday trips. Center-consoles are great, but a cabin with berths, galley and a head compartment makes sense for overnighting. This also is convenient for crew to catch some winks on long runs or for the occasional family outing. Keep in mind, also, that many buyers envision overnighting, but actual sleepovers usually are rare.

8 Think Clearly: Even in warm weather, you need to keep wind and spray at bay, and a clear enclosure is the solution for boats without wheelhouses. It's a godsend in cold weather, keeping you warm and dry. In the tropics, it staves off wind burn and salt crust. Clear-vinyl curtains are the least expensive, but they lack clarity at night. Clear polycarbonate and modified acrylic panels are pricey, but they provide outstanding visibility in all conditions.

9 Look at the Layout: Will your style of fishing fit into the layout? Do you need access to the bow for cast-netting? If so, consider a center-console with plenty of walk-around space. Do you fish on anchor, working baits from the cockpit? If so, does the transom design allow you to fight a fish around the stern? Also, consider your family members; they might desire more creature comforts, such as those found in a dual-console layout.

10 Create a Seating Plan: Fishing represents only a fraction of the time you and your crew spend aboard your boat. Much time is spent running or trolling, and no one wants to stand up all the time while under way. Plan on places for crew to sit — such as cushioned ice chests, flip-down aft bench seats, jump seats in the aft corners or seating room alongside you at the helm. There also might be comfortable seating in the cabin.

► Many new saltwater-fishing boats have flexible seating features such as benches that quickly fold away when you need to clear the deck for serious action.

11 Icing Call: Is there enough insulated storage for icing food, beverages, fish and bait? Though hard to fathom, I've seen saltwater-fishing boats with no fish boxes — so determine if there's enough cold storage for your style of fishing. Make sure the compartments are insulated and drain or pump overboard. Don't rely solely on onboard refrigerators; they often don't hold enough food or drinks to be practical.

12 Look at Towed Weight: If considering a trailer boat, make sure you can tow it safely. Compare the vehicle's towing capacity to the weight of the trailer boat. Remember that weights for outboard boats usually don't include the engine(s), and they certainly exclude the trailer, fuel, water, accessories and gear. Add these up to get the towed weight, and give yourself a 2,000-pound margin. Say your trailer boat weighs 8,000 pounds — you need 10,000 pounds of towing capacity.

13 Captain Solo: I can't always count on crew, so sometimes I fish alone. If you're in the same situation, you know that just departing the dock or launching the boat can be difficult. Yet, what happens when you hook a big tarpon or marlin and need to fight the fish and maneuver the boat? If you're looking at center-consoles or bay boats,

solo trips are very doable. But if you're buying an express or flybridge model, you'll probably need crew to go fishing.

14 Calculate Your Bait: Live-bait capacity ranks high in priority for many types of saltwater fishing, so consider the volume, as well as the shape and circulation, of the live-bait tank(s). Thirty gallons is the minimum for a tank that's cylindrical and has an eight-minute fill time. If capacity is lacking, scout the cockpit and swim step for places to install an additional, aftermarket live-bait system from companies such as Kodiak (kodiakmarine.com) or Pacific Edge (pacificedgetackle.com).

15 Measure for Electronics: Compare the dimensions of the marine electronics you desire to the available space on your boat. Multiple big-screen displays pose the biggest challenge, but today's split-screen, menu-driven LCDs can consolidate functions such as chart plotting, sonar, radar and autopilot into one screen, saving space at the helm. Also, look for places in the hull to mount a sonar transducer, as well as locations above decks or overhead for radar, VHF and GPS antennas. You might need to add an arch or a hardtop for these.

16 Assess Rod Stowage: Aim for 20 vertical rod holders. If there are fewer, look for ways to add rod holders, such as a second-tier rocket launcher on the leaning post, holders clamped along the aft rail of the flybridge or a rack bolted to the bait tank. Perko (perko.com) and C.E. Smith (cesmithco.com) offer rail-mount rod holders, but a marine fabricator can build custom stainless-steel or aluminum rod-holder racks.

17 Add Up Battery Needs: To determine battery needs, add up the continuous amps drawn by items such as live-bait pumps and lights. Then, multiply by the number of hours they'll be operating without a charge (e.g., 9 amps x 8 hours = 72 amp-hours). Double the number (to prevent discharging the batteries below 50 percent), add another 20 percent, and that's the amp-hours you'll need from the battery bank — in this example, 173 amp-hours.



18 Explore Shore Power: A shore-power system lets you tap into AC power at the dock to charge your batteries (via an onboard battery charger), and run both DC and AC electrical items without running the generator or mains. If the boat has AC accessories such as a microwave oven or air conditioning, or you're planning to add them, a shore-power system is a must. Because it involves high-voltage components, a shore-power system should be installed at the factory or by a trained professional.

19 Consider a Genset: If you can't carry enough batteries to continuously operate all the electrical items you wish without having to run the main engine, consider a marine generator. Not only can a genset keep the batteries full of juice (via an onboard battery charger), but it also can power 110-volt appliances such as a refrigerator/freezer, TV, microwave or air conditioning when you're away from shore power. There are both diesel and gasoline generators. For convenience, match the genset fuel to the main-engine fuel.

20 Lofty Thinking: Elevation offers an important angling advantage in situations such as sight-fishing for cobia off the beach, tailing marlin offshore or chasing schools of redfish on the flats. Marine fabricators can build towers for everything from sport-fishing yachts to Texas-style sleds. Also, consider a second station in the tower so you can drive the boat from aloft, as well as from the helm. For trailer boats, make sure the tower folds down for towing and storage.

21 Anchor Your Thoughts: If you plan to anchor in depths of more than 30 feet — even with a small boat — seriously consider an anchor roller and windlass. A roller keeps the rode from damaging the gunwale and



► Clockwise from top: A built-in electric grill and wet bar give you the opportunity to entertain when you're not fishing. A microwave in the cabin offers a convenient and quick way to heat up meals for you and your crew. A windlass will save your back if you plan to fish deep wrecks or anchor in the canyons. Aim for 20 vertical rod holders or look for places to add more.

renders it easier to retrieve. An electric windlass makes it effortless and helps appease a mutinous crew if deepwater anchoring is on the agenda.

22 Review 'Rigger Mounts: If your style of fishing involves outriggers, center-riggers or downriggers, examine the boat for secure mounting points. 'Riggers on a tower, T-top or hardtop might require backing plates welded into the frames — a job for a marine fabricator. If mounting 'riggers to a bulwark, check to see if that will impede bow access. For downriggers, look for access under the aft corners for through-bolting the mounts. It might require installing access plates.

23 Tech Talk: Fly-by-wire throttle-and-shift and integral digital instrumentation are available on many marine engines today. Carefully consider these choices (versus old-school cable shifting and analog gauges) before you order a new boat, as they can ease skippering duties with features such as automatic engine synchronization and auto speed control for trolling.

24 Stick Decision: Joystick controls are now available for twin inboards (with pods), stern-drives and outboards, allowing intuitive, fingertip maneuverability of a big boat. You can easily slide the boat sideways, rotate the boat on its center point, or hold position in wind and current. Mercury's new joystick system works with twin, triple or even quadruple outboards. Take time to weigh this option, particularly if you need to jockey your big new boat into a tight slip.

25 Stew on This: Crew can get tired of cold sandwiches, so consider a cooking option, such as an electric stove, a propane barbecue or a microwave oven. Some new center-consoles and dual-console models have options for electric stoves and wet bars (with fresh water for washing up) built into the back of seat pods. Microwaves are options on many cabin boats, just in case the crew wants a breakfast burrito or hot coffee en route to the fishing grounds.

You can create your ultimate saltwater boat. Yet the concept is fleeting, as fishing boats are works in progress. You'll always look for new equipment and the latest upgrades in the never-ending quest to make it yours. For more ideas, visit sportfishingmag.com/five-more-steps.