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PARADISE LIVING ARTICLE / FEBRUARY 2017

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What Kind of Boat Should I Buy?

I get asked this question often. The answer can be as varied as the people asking the question. There are several questions you have to ask yourself and honesty is the key to making the best decision. "What is your primary use going to be?" The answer to this question will usually narrow the choice down to a category of vessel. If your answer is "offshore day fishing," we can eliminate most vessels less than 23' in length as well as cruising boats. If your answer is "cruising the Caribbean for months at a time," we can eliminate all open boats and coastal cruisers. For that type of boating, you'll need something extremely sea-worthy that has quite a bit of range to make the trips between islands.

The next question is "Where are you going to keep the vessel?" If you are going to keep it in the water, you should consider going with an inboard propulsion system that can handle the corrosive environment of saltwater. If you are going to keep it on a lift, then you have to determine the parameters of your lift, or the parameters of the space you have to build a lift. Boat lifts can limit the weight, length and beam of a vessel. You will need this information before beginning to shop for a boat.

Some general information that will be useful when considering which type of vessel you wish to purchase:

Outboard Engines have become extremely reliable, more fuel-efficient and, in the last few years, have broken many horsepower barriers. Outboards still have some limitations, however. First, outboards are generally built from aluminum. Even though most of the engine can be tilted out of the water, the engine mounting brackets and some of the hydraulic tilting mechanism will still be in the water. It is this author's opinion that outboard vessels are best stored out of the water, either on a lift or in a boat storage building. The other limitation is torque. While outboard engines are getting higher and higher horsepower ratings, they are still limited to some degree by the size of the propeller they turn. In other words, they are a great propulsion choice for lightweight narrow vessels; they are not a good choice for a large heavy motor yacht. It is the same reason we do not see large semi-trucks on the highway using gas engines. Gas engines simply do not have the torque to push heavy loads efficiently. We are now beginning to see some diesel outboards. This technology is relatively new, however, and horsepower options are severely limited at this point.

Inboard/Outboards have advantages and disadvantages. I/O propulsion systems are generally more fuel efficient than their straight inboard counterparts and they can take advantage of higher torque inboard engines in both gas and diesel than their outboard counterparts. They are, however, still limited by the size of propellers they can spin. Think of your propellers like the wheels and tires on your car.

Again, you would not see an 18-wheel semi-tractor trailer going down the road with car-sized tires. Larger propellers are needed to push the weight of a large and heavy motor vessel. The other disadvantage of I/O propulsion is the drive units are generally made from aluminum and, again, it is this author's opinion that I/O vessels be kept out of the water when not in use.

The last category of propulsion is **Inboard**, which consists of an engine inside the vessel and running gear below the vessel, which may consist of a shaft, strut, propeller and rudder, or a POD style drive. These systems come in a huge variety of choices from gas engines less than 100 horsepower, to diesel engines of many thousands of horsepower. Shaft and strut running gear is less efficient than POD drive systems, however, generally they can swing much larger propellers, have less moving parts, are less complicated and less costly to maintain. POD drive systems are generally more fuel-efficient and, using computers and a joystick control system, are much easier to control, especially for the less experienced boater. Inboard propulsion systems are generally made from materials that are extremely resistant to corrosion, so inboards are the best choice if a vessel must be left in the water full time. If you are looking for the latest and greatest technology and joystick maneuvering, a POD drive vessel is an excellent choice. Pod drive systems are available for vessels from mid 30' up to 60'. There are a few larger vessels with triple and quad engine set ups, but they are less common. Above 60', nearly all vessels are going to be traditional inboards with shafts, struts and rudders.