

Annapolis Boat Dealer Starting a New Trend?

By Paul Esterle

When I moved here from Tennessee several years ago, I immediately missed one segment of boating that was very familiar to me; houseboats. Back on our TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority) lake in Tennessee, houseboats were the rage. In fact, they outnumbered everything but bass boats on our lake. These were no stay-at-the-dock house cottages either. They were out on the lake almost every nice weekend.

They ranged in size from the little 18' homemade cabin on a raft that the 82 year old woman owner took out every weekend up to the 70' long all aluminum behemoths we all called "aircraft carriers". They were well used and very popular. Note that these were not "house barges".

House barges float but have no propulsive power. On TVA lakes, as well as many other locations, they are regulated differently than houseboats. Existing house barges are grandfathered in on TVA lakes. The only way you can get a new one is to buy an old one, tear it down and build a new one using the existing license number.

In any case, I was surprised not to see houseboats on Chesapeake Bay waterways. Maybe not in the open bay but certainly in the sheltered bays and tributaries the Chesapeake is famed for. Some long time Chesapeake Bay boaters I talked indicated that they used to be very popular on the bay but seem to have dwindled in numbers over recent years.

I recently came across one boat dealer, Bay Yacht Agency, who seems intent on bucking that trend. They have become dealers for Harbor Homes houseboats. The plant building the boats as well as boats under construction is regular inspected by the United States Coast Guard. The boats are approved by the Army Corps of Engineers and the builder is a member of the American Boat and Yacht Councils and follows their recommendations.

These are true houseboats powered by outboards. That was a trend I noticed in Tennessee also. As the inboard gasoline engines on many of the boats needed repair or reached the end of their useful life, they were replaced by outboards on stern brackets. The outboards were capable of pushing the houseboats as fast as the owners wanted and were more fuel efficient and less expensive than their inboard cousins.

These boats are steered from helm stations that can be fitted with the latest in marine electronics: chartplotters, GPS units and fish finders, for example.

The houseboats offered by Bay Yacht Agency had some features that were very different from the houseboats that I am familiar with. For one thing, they had pitched roofs as opposed to the common flat roof. That feature alone would have made them very popular back in Tennessee. We didn't get snow very much or very often but when we did it was a killer.

One early spring, we got 16" of heavy wet snow followed by a cold rain. The rain didn't melt the snow; the snow just soaked the rain up like a sponge. This snow accumulated on the flat roofs of the houseboats to the point several sank at the dock due to the snow load. That snow would have simply slid off a pitched roof.

Other features that caught my eye were the sewage and greywater systems installed in these boats. In years past, houseboats have been blamed for contributing to

water pollution. Regulation and compliance has improved dramatically and USCG compliant sanitation systems are standard. However, Harbor Homes has chosen a slightly different tack; they have available incinerating or composting toilets to handle the sewage problem and a new type of system to handle greywater.

Incinerating toilets contain the human waste and drop it into an incineration chamber where heat is used to reduce the waste to a small amount of clean ash. That ash is sterile, odor-free and can be disposed of in the trash.

Composting toilets mix the human waste with a small amount of peat moss or similar material and then compost it over several months. The result is odor-free compost that can be used to fertilize flowers, trees and lawns. I can vouch for the composting toilet; I used one aboard a rented house barge over a recent weekend. No smell, no mess and easy operation.

In either system, the advantage is there is no holding tank to pump and no possible way of discharging sewage into the water.

Most boats do discharge greywater. Greywater is water from sinks, showers and the like. Not sewage but not sparkling clean either. The Harbor Homes boats feature the GreenSystem for capturing and treating greywater. Depending on the model chosen, the output of the system can be clean enough to drink. So far, this is the only greywater system I've actually seen installed on a houseboat.

Another feature I like is the welded aluminum hull; I had a steel house boat next to me in Tennessee almost sink due to corrosion (remind me to tell you THAT story sometime!). I can't personally vouch for the above deck construction but it looks good from the photos I've seen. Plenty of jigs for accurate construction and what looked like quality materials. It may be a little known fact, but the majority of houseboat cabins are built from standard construction lumber. I liked that fact that all wooden members were also epoxied together, eliminating any chance of the wall loosening up due to fasteners working loose.

One thing I did notice that would drive me crazy but delight my wife; the ability to customize the interior. Many different options, including sundecks, standard household appliances, stacked laundry appliances, sunrooms and even a sunken hot tub and a spiral staircase! I did see one option that was familiar and also popular back in Tennessee, a water slide off the optional sundeck.

All this is on a 55' long hull that is 15' wide. Bay Yacht Agency and Harbor Homes have just announced a new luxury model, the St. Augustine, for 2009. Built on the standard 55' aluminum hull, this model features three staterooms in what Harbor Homes calls a "luxury" houseboat.

Drop by or call the Bay Yacht folks at 326 First Street, #29, over in Eastport, Maryland. I'd say Annapolis but then they'd revoke my MRE passport. You can also call them at 1-800-922-4820 or visit their web sites at:

www.bayacht.com
www.harborhouseboats.com

Check 'em out and you too may be on your way to joining the trend towards more houseboats on the bay.