



SHIPYARD SURVIVAL

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUG MITCHELL

Every crew member has or will experience one at some point. Some are long and arduous, while others short and sweet. They happen all over the coastal world and in some spots involve a lot of people at the same time. I've had a few of them myself, but can promise you that some people have had a lot more. Of course, I'm talking about the yard period.

Whether it's for routine maintenance or a major refit, spending some time in a shipyard is part of working in the yachting industry, and depending on what work needs being done, it can mean something quite different for all crew members. A stint away from the busy charter schedule can equate to some well-earned holidays, a visit home to see family and friends, or just a bit of R&R to recharge the batteries.

For some, it's a chance to throw a few of those greenbacks or Euros around on whatever you've been dreaming about over the last few weeks while serving guests or driving tenders, while for others it presents the challenge of keeping them in the wallet now that you're not working 24/7 — the latter being more difficult when surrounded by crew ready to let loose.

The shipyard is usually a good place to catch up with friends from other boats, their presence there sometimes anticipated, sometimes a surprise, but always a good opportunity to share some laughs and stories of the past season. The facilities, some more than others, provide a good setting for the camaraderie among yachties to play out, spawning new friends out of the common highlights and challenges we all face working on boats; being able to share a laugh between captains, deckhands, chefs, or stews is what keeps the yachting community strong. It may seem like a crazy lifestyle full of ups and downs at times, but spending any time in the yard sure reminds us that we're not alone.

While for some crew it's all fun and games during this time, for others it means hitting the books and tak-

ing some more courses to secure that grasp on the next rung on the yachting ladder. For many owners, having competent crew means that they never stop learning, and if you're fortunate enough like I have been, getting paid to further your education during this time means that you'll be even more competent the next time the vessel splashes and heads out for another season.

Whether you're tied to the dock or hauled out onto the blocks, the yard period also provides the unique opportunity to learn some things about your boat that you couldn't otherwise do while under way or with guests on board. Testing fire equipment, removing or inspecting props, improving some of the entertainment or navigational systems are just a few of the things that only get done while in the offseason and always worth being a part of when possible.

Any yard stretch also means a lot of different people stepping on board, hopefully all removing their shoes. Some are ex-yachties that have shifted to the land-based side of the industry and have a lot of good stories and knowledge of their own. Some are skilled trade's

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workers that have never left the dock but sure know what they're doing when it comes to boats. And others, well, others you would just rather not have on the boat at all if you could help it. Especially for deck crew who are used to keeping things spotless and gleaming all the time, watching the filth accumulate from the various shipyard culprits and not being able to throw some soapy water around to get rid of it for extended periods can be quite unnerving. But, hopefully, the end result is a better looking boat and the ongoing battle of fending off dirt, dust, sparks, paint overspray, etc. is eventually won and worth the fight.

Getting the rust off, both literally and figuratively, is also usually a benefit of a hunkering down in a yard for a while. Learning or re-learning some exterior skills, however tedious they may seem, is only going to help in the future when looking for that next job, or maybe if you're lucky enough, maintaining your own boat one day. It's always a good time to review some first-aid knowledge, and sprinkling some safety drills into the work week is good for everyone. It's not uncommon to hear random

alarms coming from the boat next to you with the crew not looking genuinely alarmed. If they're putting on the Gummy suits while dry-docked, let's hope it's a drill and that they don't know something you don't.

So, whatever reasons bring us into the shipyards of the world and for however long, we might as well make the best of them. Some people love them, while others don't look forward to them at all. But the ironic truth about boats being pulled out of the water is that it keeps a lot of other people afloat. From boat builders to dayworkers, the yard period plays a big role in the industry, and whether it's for a week or a year, hopefully they make us appreciate being able to motor or sail the waters beyond them. ☺

Doug Mitchell is the bosun aboard the 130-foot Westport M/Y Sovereign. He grew up in High River, Alberta, Canada, and studied photojournalism at college in Calgary. He has been in yachting since 2008.

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