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Taiwan's Venerable Trawlers - Text-only Version

Robert M. Lane
01 Aug 1998

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Older boats from Taiwan. A deal, or not? We often hear bad things about them, yet they are intriguing because prices are modest compared to today's new boats, and they offer the possibility of being comfortable, roomy cruising yachts.

The older boats that came out of Taiwan have a timeless quality. Designed in the 1960s, Taiwan trawlers changed little in appearance as thousands were built through the 1970s and early 1980s and flooded a world market hungry for budget-priced boats that were economical to operate and fun to own.

A Taiwan boat 25 years old still looks much like trawlers built today throughout the Far East. They look yachty, but with styling features reminiscent of stout work boats. A boat you could count on. Perhaps.

In fact, there are so many look-alike Taiwan powerboats, many popped from the same molds but given different names and built by so many yards, that buyers and owners alike are confused about their history and heritage.

Aside from their given names—Marine Trader, CHB, North Sea, Puget Trawler, La Paz, Roughwater, DeFever, Albin, Her Shine, Universal, to name only a few—Taiwan boats have collected a list of scurrilous and derisive nicknames: Taiwan Tubs. Tupperware boats. Clorox bottles. Cheap Junk!

It's true that not every one of the thousands of boats produced in the many Taiwan yards in the late 1960s, the 1970s, and into the 1980s was built perfectly. Poor quality was a problem in the early days and it took years for the industry to shake that reputation. Today some U.S. boatyard owners still dismiss them as unfit for serious boating, having spent many years hauling, painting and fixing them.

But even among the problem boats of the early years may be found flakes of gold...decent cruising boats at bargain prices.

At a time when many new 36-foot trawlers sell for more than \$300,000, imagine the pleasure of Terry Allen of Kirkland, WA, who last year bought a 1979, 37-foot North Sea Trawler for \$55,000. He was one step ahead of a banker who wanted to repossess the Taiwan-built yacht.

Allen spent nine months looking at about 50 trawlers, most of them of Taiwan heritage, scattered the length of Puget Sound.

"I had about given up," he said, "but finally a broker called with one that was unlisted, a repo."

He hired a Bellingham, WA, surveyor, Matt Harris, who is known for his knowledge of older Taiwan-built boats. Harris gained his skill while working in Taiwan as a surveyor and buyer's representative.

"He was the best I could find who was an authority," Allen said. "He was very thorough—and that was what I wanted."

The North Sea Trawler was okay mechanically. Its hull was good. The boat needed cosmetic attention and system improvements.

Since the purchase, Allen has refinished much of the exterior teak, had canvas covers sewn for the flybridge, installed an inverter, a new windlass and updated the marine sanitation system.

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He pulled up a worn, dirty carpet in the saloon and discovered a like-new teak parquet sole, its finish still glistening. He is considering installation of a stern thruster to improve closequarters maneuverability with the singleengined boat.

Allen's boat, named *Serenity*, is of a standard semi-displacement design. Like most trawler types she has a deep forefoot, a long keel and hard chines for stability. Most travel at displacement speeds of seven to eight knots.

Serenity is a double-cabin trawler. She has a V-berth stateroom forward, with a head. Aft, there is a larger master stateroom, with a walkaround double bed, and a head with a mini-tub. The saloon includes a steering station, galley, dining table and lounging area. Her interior is richly trimmed with teak. Her beam is 12' 6" and her draft is three feet.

She provides comfortable cruising accommodations for two couples, yet the boat is easily handled by two persons.

The side decks are generous and her cockpit provides space for fishing and relaxing. An unusual feature is a seat molded into the aft end of the deckhouse. Allen has done one more important thing that will help keep *Serenity* shipshape and seaworthy: he moors her under cover.

Design features that distinguish *Serenity*, and thousands of other Taiwan boats, from the Grand Banks series they resemble, is the high, flared, round bow and the curving brow on the bridge. GBs have a straight stem and no flare, which gives the bow a sharper "V" look.

On Taiwan boats, the outside saloon doors usually are sliders. Many boats have vast quantities of exterior teak inside and out—heavy beads around windows, over joints, in the doors, and for decoration. Inside, you may find carved door panels and other custom teak work. Most Taiwan boats have teak decks as well. Beautiful wood, but a lot of maintenance if it's out in the rain or left in tropical sun.

In The Thousands

Taiwan shipyards built wood fishing and work boats for many years, until, more or less by accident, a few began building pleasure boats in the mid-1960s with a new material—fiberglass reinforced plastic.

"Companies had little experience and were mostly small family concerns," reported Nick Hopkinson, in a 1979 report published by IPC Business Press. In 1973, according to his study, there were 10 yards building pleasure boats in Taiwan, mostly for U.S. dealers who had been subcontracting yacht construction in Japan and who came to Taiwan seeking lower costs after being hurt by devaluation of the Japanese currency.

By 1976, there were 20 pleasure boat builders in action. Then the idea caught fire as a worldwide market welcomed the modestly-priced Taiwan boats, and in 1979 an estimated 65 to 70 yards were cranking out motor yachts, trawlers and sailboats. They were clustered on the north end of the island, in and near Taipei, and on the south end, near Kaohsiung.

"It was a speculative period when new dealers, many from the automobile business, saw a future in boats from Taiwan," Hopkinson wrote. "These dealers did not bring much boat building know-how, but they bought a lot of boats and were responsible for the build up in the production volume of basically similar styles."

Hopkinson said C.T. Chen, owner of the Ta Chiao boat-building firm, "has one of the strongest claims to being the originator of the pleasure-boat industry" (in Taiwan). His first sailboat, a 30-footer, was built in 1958 of wood. He switched to fiberglass in 1962 with the construction of a 35-foot yacht and built a line of CT sail and power boats.

Bill Hardin, an American, moved his yacht construction business from Japan to Taiwan in 1966, Hopkinson said. His firm, Far East, had the first molds for the 34' trawler that would become the most popular of the Taiwan boats.

Hardin sold his yard and the molds to Sinclair Wen, who owned the Chien Hwa yard and an interest in the Chung Hwa shipyard. Both yards built a line of CHBs and similar boats sold under other names.

The Taiwan industry began to mature in the late 1970s, Hopkinson reported. "Established U.S. dealers joined the speculators in response to the massive increase in imports which was beginning to threaten their market share. They brought with them new designs and technical know-how and, in some cases, even shipped completed molds, together with U.S. production supervisors."

“Competitive pricing is still the main reason behind the phenomenal growth in boat building in Taiwan,” Hopkinson wrote in 1979. “Most boats built in Taiwan carry a 100 per cent markup between the FOB price in Taiwan and the final retail figure in the U.S. or Europe.

It was estimated that in 1978 Taiwan yards built between 700 and 1,000 sailboats and between 1,700 and 2,000 trawlers. Most were sold in the U.S.

Where Are They Now?

Taiwan-built boats cover the earth. They are common throughout the Pacific Northwest, in California, on the Great Lakes and all along the East Coast of North America. You’ll find them cruising the Inside Passage of British Columbia and gunkholing in Southeast Alaska. They are also a common sight in Mexico and the Caribbean, and can be found in large numbers on both sides of Florida’s coastline. These boats regularly cruise the Chesapeake, the Great Lakes, and both directions on the ICW.

Because they were originally priced less than Grand Banks, because they have not appreciated like older GBs and, frankly, because of their poor reputation, Taiwan boats are available today at bargain prices, relatively speaking.

Try \$98,000 for a 1979, 41-foot CHB. A Grand Banks 42-footer from the same year would cost nearly \$100,000 more.

How about \$49,000 for a nicely refurbished 34-foot, 1976 CHB, the most ubiquitous of all Taiwan boats? Or \$89,500 for a 37-foot, 1978 Puget Trawler? And here’s a 43-foot, 1978 DeFever for \$129,500.

Generally, they have one engine, although many of the larger boats were powered by twins. The engine of choice was the 120-horsepower Ford Lehman, which had 80 percent of the Far East market in its pocket during the 1970s. That engine is no longer produced, but parts are widely available.

If It Sounds Too Good To Be True...

Tempting? Yes. But there is one warning that cannot be ignored should you consider buying an older boat, whether it was one of the many thousands built in Taiwan or a Grand Banks from Singapore or Hong Kong: know the boats well, shop carefully and thoroughly, and hire the best surveyors you can find for hull and mechanical systems. Be patient, and don’t make a snap decision to buy. Follow Allen’s experience and look far and wide before deciding.

“Educate yourself,” emphasized Allen, who took all the right steps in his successful search. “I ran into brokers who didn’t know these boats—they couldn’t tell whether one had a fiberglass house, or not.”

The issue of fiberglass over wood side walls may be crucial. If water penetrates through a crack in the finish or around the windows, all the inner wood framing is subject to rot. This is difficult to repair, and requires working from inside the boat to remove all interior paneling to get at the framing.

The boats vary tremendously in this area. Some boats have glass coatings thick as bank vault doors. On others, the fiberglass is as thin as sugar frosting.

The easiest way to check sidewall composition is to remove the shorepower fitting to expose a cross-section of wall. Layers of fiberglass and plywood will be obvious.

Some early Taiwan boats had all-wood deckhouses (with no gel coat frosting). Most builders were launching all-fiberglass boats by the early 1980s. But don’t count on these generalities always being true. Allen said he inspected a 1978 model that had an all-glass deckhouse. He also saw a 1983 boat with a plywood house.

Educating yourself is difficult. There are no dealers specializing in Taiwan yachts, although most brokers have several in their used-boat fleets and some salesmen and women have become knowledgeable about these boats. And no one has yet to write the definitive history of the early days of Chinese yacht construction.

Common Bugaboos

Okay, so what else can go wrong? Problems cited by owners and repair yards include ineptly-laid teak decks and shoddy electrical work (although many wiring problems can also be traced to improper installation of add-on electrical gear by previous boat owners).

Other black marks include improperly glassed wood stringers that rot over time, rough gelcoat, poor joinery, leaks in joints and around windows, and inadequate ventilation of the overhead cavity.

Repair yards have found improperly-placed engines, and propeller shafts with only one cutlass bearing between gear box and propeller.

Many boats show up with rusty steel fuel tanks, but that problem usually is the result of poor maintenance (leaking deck fittings), and not construction practices.

Glass workers did not always roll out fiberglass fabric sufficiently, leaving air pockets in the fiberglass, particularly in places hard to reach with a roller. That's not generally a structural problem, but it means that Taiwan boats may need gelcoat repair more often.

Chances are good that any boat that has been cruised for 20 years will need new electronics, and a buyer will perhaps also want to replace the galley stove and refrigerator, window draperies, and interior upholstery. While the engine may still be sound, it may need new heat exchangers, exhaust systems and hoses.

Some Professional Opinions

Bob Lowe, who owns an Oak Harbor, WA, repair yard, dismisses older Taiwan-built boats as "all junk." Would he buy an older boat? Probably not. But he says that okay boats are available to buyers "who keep their eyes open."

He added: "Typically, what we have found is that the hulls are fairly strong, but the design balance is horrible. The CHB is bow heavy and the center of gravity is all wrong." (In affirmation of Lowe's criticism, Terry Allen's *Serenity* has bags of cement under the berth in the aft stateroom.)

"A lot of CHBs leak brown juice out of the overhead cabin top," Lowe told me. "It is juice from deteriorating wood. The wood is getting wet and it's almost impossible to deal with economically."

Greg Allen, of Northwest Yacht Repair in Seattle, advises prospective buyers to check carefully the condition of fuel and electrical systems. He has seen Taiwan-built boats in which water has seeped beneath the teak decking and frozen. As ice forms and expands, it lifts the deck planking, pulling screws free and leaving thousands of holes in the deck surface.

"Because you are buying for less cost than new, you've got to factor in a percentage of the purchase price for refurbishing," Allen said. "The key is a very good survey."

(See "Getting More for Less" in the Winter 1997 issue of *PassageMaker* for tips on refurbishing an old boat.)

The Good News

Considering these problems, what's the attraction to a prospective buyer?

Taiwan boats generally have stout hulls. Fiberglass construction was new in the 1960s and 1970s and overbuilding was common. Yards used bucket-and-brush techniques to apply fiberglass, and the result was a product rich in resin—a long-term benefit is that blisters are less common than on newer hulls.

Properly maintained, the Ford Lehman diesel engines used in most Taiwan boats are reliable and long-lived. Assuming normal usage, a 20-year old diesel likely has thousands of hours of service remaining.

Bob Smith, who then was executive vice president of Lehman Power Corporation, which produced the Ford Lehman diesel engine, and who continues in the marine diesel business today, says an engine that is well-maintained and upgraded will run 20,000 hours before a major overhaul is needed.

And those engines are economical to operate, using only a couple of gallons of fuel an hour, unlike many of today's turbocharged speed-is-king engines.

Boat designs of that period were stout, simple and enduring. The Taiwan yacht fits comfortably in the trawler family. Because there is nothing outlandish about their appearance, and because there were no design peculiarities to date the boats, there is little to spook prospective buyers at resale time. In fact, to the average viewer, many Taiwan boats look like the more expensive Grand Banks.

And, as we have seen, prices are modest. "There were different levels of quality, depending on the builder and on how much the buyer was willing to pay," Smith said of the Taiwan shipyard industry, which he visited frequently over the years to sell Ford Lehman diesels. "Every importer of housewares and plastic crap from Taiwan suddenly became a boat importer, and often bought from the worst yards." That really set everything back.

However, Smith says Taiwan boats that pass a rigorous survey represent an "excellent value...the Taiwan boat is one hellacious value for the money."

Bob Smith is still in the diesel engine business, but he is also president of the Marine Trader Owners' Association. It's a group that accepts any trawler as a member, but which is really named for the line of boats imported by Don Miller of Marine Trading International, a New Jersey firm that imported about 3,000 Taiwan boats to the U.S., mostly during the hot market in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Miller introduced the 34' aft-cabin boat to the U.S. market in the early days of Taiwan boat building. "He turned a switch," Smith recalls. "He sold 20 to 25 boats before he even had a production line. I bought the third boat—and it came without an engine.

"Where could you get a 34-foot aft cabin for under \$25,000, with fitted curtains and teak parquet. What a deal! There were more built of that style than any other boat ever built."

Today, Smith said, the 34' trawler "...is a heck of a buy for someone who wants to start out in family boating."

"Our main claim to fame was a lot of boat for the money," Don Miller told me. "Maybe it was not the best in the world, but it was a lot for the money. We put a lot of people in boats who couldn't afford them any other way."

Miller said he hired Ed Monk to design his first trawler, the 1968 Eagle, a round-bottomed yacht. He then retained Floyd Ayers, after Monk died during the design of a second yacht for Marine Trading. Ayers continued to design Marine Traders for 30 years.

Initially builders were wary of fiberglass, a new material in the early 1960s. Because of uncertainties about it, "The saying was, 'You'll lose your ass in fiberglass,'" Miller said.

Like others, Miller considered ferro-cement construction as an alternative to fiberglass and wood. "Fortunately, I didn't do it."

Many of those stoutly-built early fiberglass hulls are still healthy today. Aging and lack of care may have left gelcoat dull and stained, but paint will cover those flaws.

Miller still builds the Marine Trader, in a factory near Shanghai, in sizes ranging from 34 to 50 feet, but they're available only at his New Jersey brokerage. The 34-foot model, which sold for \$36,000 in the mid-1970s, today is priced at \$129,500. Although the boat shape remains the same, the look is different because exterior teak has been eliminated to create a boat requiring less maintenance.

Setting The Stage For Confusion

Taiwan boat building was a true cottage industry in the 1960s and 1970s. Chickens scratched in the doorways of shipyards and families worked out of their homes building boats and cabinetry, and no one kept track of who was doing what. As the idea of building boats caught on, speculators and sincere builders opened yards by the dozen. The shipyard producing the fiberglass hull would often contract finishing work to teams of craftsmen. Many of those crews were family-based—brothers, mom and dad, cousins.

At their peak those yards produced, by some estimates, nearly 3,000 power and sail boats a year. Although they enjoyed world-wide acceptance, most of those boats flooded U.S. markets. These boats made many buyers happy, and they also proved tough competition for more expensive boats, such as the Grand Banks. That competition squashed some U.S. firms who had decidedly higher production costs.

To meet this demand, which spread confusion even more, the owners of a yard building a specific boat for one importer would lend the molds to a brother, cousin or friend working in another yard. This other yard would produce a look-alike boat that would then be sold under another name...or the same name.

Designs and plans were routinely pirated, setting a precedent for those in the Far East who would copy software and CDs decades later.

"For a while everyone was copying everything we did," Don Miller said. Once, while he was in Taiwan, Miller ordered 23 changes in the boats. He went home two weeks later and found other importers advertising the same 23 improvements.

"It was very difficult to stop," he remembers. "They would take our 40 and stretch it to 48 feet."

In some cases, firms building a specific boat, such as the Marine Trader, would license other firms to sell the same boat under a different name, such as Puget Trawler.

A U.S. importer, needing a dozen boats in a hurry, would often spread its order over several yards—three here, a pair there, and singles elsewhere. Although some importers, including Marine Trading International and

Albin, had naval architects and inspectors on site in Taiwan checking construction, there often was no guarantee of quality control or uniform building procedures and standards.

The result of all this history is that, decades later, buyers may have no real way of knowing who built their dream boat.

A Difficult Genealogy

Tracing a boat's family roots can be frustrating for those who want to know more about the boats they love.

The same boat may bear many names. Marine Trader, Puget Trawler, La Paz, Chung Hwa, CHB, North Sea Trawler, C&L, Grand Mariner—all look much the same and likely were popped from the same molds.

Occasionally hull identification numbers will hint at the builder: CHB would indicate the boat was built by Chung Hwa Boat Building. The initials OYI suggest that the boat was built by Overseas Yachts, Inc.

Some hulls don't have any identifying numbers and others are not very revealing—Terry Allen's *Serenity*, for example, has a hull number beginning with R, but he had been unable to connect that with any specific builder. It may, however, indicate the boat was built by ROC Marine Industry Corp. in Kaohsiung, a yard that was organized in 1978, and began producing 37-foot trawlers in 1979, the year his boat was built.

Some investors owned yards outright and held major interests in other yards. Several U.S. importers, including Miller of Marine Trading International, had financial interests in some of the yards that built their boats.

For example: Sinclair Wen owned the Chung Hwa Boat Building Co. The yard built a huge number of CHB trawlers from 34' to 66' as well as the LaFitte series of sailboats. Wen later acquired a financial interest in Chien Hwa, another major producer of trawlers ranging from 34' to 42', including the popular Krogen 42.

C&L was another strong yard whose builder's plate appears on many Taiwan boats. Alexander Cheu, who was a foreman at C&L, went on to launch the successful Ocean Alexander line of boats. Ocean Alexander is still going strong today, proof that quality construction is synonymous with today's Taiwan yards.

One of the most famous and popular of the early Taiwan boats is the Ocean Alexander Mark I, a pilothouse 50. A heavy, comfortable boat with spacious staterooms and a large saloon, the twin-diesel boat probably cost about \$125,000 fully commissioned in 1980. Today, they sell for as much as \$300,000 here in the Pacific Northwest, and would-be buyers run magazine ads in their search for a good used Mark I.

Arthur DeFever designed a popular series of yachts that were built by a number of yards and launched with his name, although in the Xeroxlike business climate of Taiwan, other DeFever designs carried different names, such as Hudson.

Still others were built in the island nation—Roughwater, Wanderer, Universal, North Sea, Eagle/Farallon and Ocean, among others.

The Coaster 33, originally a wood boat, was built in fiberglass by Bill Hardin in Taiwan at Chung Hwa Boat Building under many other names, including Bluewater, Imperial, Heritage, Golden Gate and Far East. With this boat, some credit Hardin with introducing the generic Taiwan 34, a pocket yacht that would be built by many Taiwan yards and sold around the world under many names.

The Hopkinson report published in 1979 includes cursory information on the boats produced by each of 56 builders listed. It indicated that at least 10 yards were building the 34-footer, although some listed it as a 33. These builders included Fu Hwa, Chien Hwa, Chung Hwa, CTF Marine, C.C. Chen Boat Yard, Ta Chiao Bros. Yacht Building, Ta Chou Ship Building and Ta Tong Yacht Building Co. Undoubtedly, there were others...

When the new trawlers reached the U.S., most of them were given names that would appeal to English-speaking buyers: Marine Trader, North Sea Trawler, and Puget Trawler, to name a few.

Another example of the same boat bearing different names: Gary Bennett of Sacramento, CA, recently caught trawler fever and bought a 36' San Francisco, a 1978 trawler he knew was built by the Ho Hsing yard in Taiwan. That's all he knew about the boat until he noticed a magazine ad for an identical boat. It was an Albin 36. And then he found another look-alike—a Her Shine double-cabin trawler built by a yard of the same name that matched his boat inside and out.

A Story Behind Every Boat

Bill and Joyce Bloch of Seattle bought their 34-foot CHB trawler new in 1976 from Jerry Schei of Edmonds Yachts Sales.

“At the time we made the original deal the price was \$34,500, but by the time we finally got delivery the price was raised to \$36,000. We raised hell with Schei, of course, but he simply replied that if we didn’t like the deal he would refund our down payment.

“We didn’t realize until then that he had potential buyers for those boats lined up ten deep,” Bill Bloch said.

(Others estimate that Schei was importing 200 Taiwan boats a year at that time, many purchased from Don Miller’s Marine Trading International, which also sold the same boats as Marine Traders.)

Bloch continues: “Originally the boats were marketed by Fred Smalley who was also the importer of record. He sold them under the name of Puget Trawler. Sometime in late ‘76 or early ‘77, Smalley lost the importing rights to Schei, who was wildly successful in selling those trawlers.

“Our boat is 21 years old now and still going strong,” Bloch said. “It’s been relatively troublefree with just under 4,000 hours of operation.”

The first boats imported by Smalley and Schei caught on quickly in the early 1970s, partly because of their traditional design and because of the generous space they offered.

Another factor of extreme importance was their operating economy. The single diesels burned only a couple of gallons an hour at a time when a Middle East crude oil embargo jacked up the price of fuel and left Americans waiting in long lines for fuel.

Times Have Changed

When Don Miller began building Marine Trader trawlers in the late 1960s, shipyard workers earned \$250 to \$300 a year. “Now they get \$85 to \$90 a day,” Miller said.

Small builders eventually disappeared as competition stiffened and quality control improved. In addition, some of the waterfront land used by shipyards became too valuable for merely building boats. Fiberglass workers and carpenters were ousted and modern buildings erected. Barely a dozen yards survive today.

And that explains why many budget-minded builders and importers, including Miller, have moved manufacturing to China, where wages remain comparatively low. The remaining Taiwan yards are still quite busy, but now build quality, expensive yachts, including the Nordhavn, Ocean Alexander, and Krogen.

The modest-budget and traditional eight-knot trawler is a rarity in the island nation these days.

(Current wages on Taiwan are so high that American builders are able to compete head-on in the international recreational boating market from which they once were barred by higher labor costs.)

A Couple’s Experience Is Typical

Bob and Gerri Bachman, a Puget Sound cruising couple, recently sold a Bayliner and bought a 35-foot, 1979 Chien Hwa (or CHB) for \$68,000. They moor Sea Gull at the Bremerton Yacht Club.

“We decided we wanted to change over from a Bayliner because we were interested in the journey, not just the destination,” Gerri Bachman said.

“We researched all we could find about trawlers and where they were made, looked in all the magazines and hopped on Passage- Maker’s web site to learn as much as we could. Then we sat down and made a list of things we would like in a trawler. Topping the list was fiberglass construction, centerline double bed, a well laid out saloon and a diesel engine.”

The Bachmans launched an Internet search for brokers and boats, shooting messages to 30 sales firms. One who responded with an abundance of information was Barbara Floyd of Discovery Yachts in Seattle. It was some time before Bob and Gerri learned that Discovery is actually a sailboat brokerage.

The dream boat, a sedan with a double bed, turned out to be a budget breaker for a couple looking to retirement. With their broker’s help, however, they continued their search for an aftcabin boat with a walk-around bed, and a sound engine and hull.

One boat flunked its survey by Matt Harris. But the second was a winner.

“She is sound, in need of brightwork refinishing and the teak needs oiling,” Gerri said in an E-Mail message. “She has a walk-around double in the aft cabin (we still like to cuddle). She has a single 135-horsepower Perkins, Ardic heat, radar, a GPS, autopilot, inverter and a fully enclosed flybridge.

“When we bought our Bayliner she was new and we just hopped aboard and enjoyed. This time we will have to roll up our shirt sleeves and get up close and personal with all parts of this boat. We think the journey of getting her back into the beautiful boat she once was will make us feel she is a part of the family.”

The Bachmans' experience with the first Taiwan boat they took to survey holds lessons for all of us. First, they scheduled their sea trial and the survey for the same day. That was a mistake.

The sea trial alone revealed flaws that would have caused them to drop their offer on the boat. The survey confirmed those problems and found others.

“When we came aboard (for the sea trial) we turned on the radar. It did not work,” Gerri recalled. “We turned on the GPS. It was searching and continued to do so for the rest of the day. We tried the water system and it did not work. We turned on the generator...it was one step away from a blown head gasket.

“We tried the autopilot but it turned us so far off course that we could have been on shore. The two compasses did not match...

“And then we had it hauled. When they hit her with the pressure hose, the bottom paint came flying off in sheets. The owner wouldn't believe all this was happening to his boat.

“It was evident that the bottom had been painted several times and not once was it ever sanded and prepped correctly. But this was not the bad news...the bottom was covered with blisters, every inch,” Gerri said.

The owner offered to split the cost of repairs with the Bachmans. They walked.

The Critical Survey

We met Matt Harris in Gig Harbor, WA, as the 36-foot Barefoot, a 1984 Miracle Marine trawler, was lifted from the water for a condition-and-value survey requested by a prospective buyer. A \$90,000 offer was on the line.

Her fiberglass hull and deckhouse glistened in the mid-day sun and her teak rails glowed, indicating recent varnish work. With nonskid fiberglass decks, she was a harbinger of the less-teak-is-better movement.

The interior looked clean and comfortable. Furniture was trimmed with heavy teak.

Harris would not discuss specific findings as he tapped the hull with a hammer, checked propeller alignment and tugged on the shaft to see if it was loose in its bearings; that information was for the potential buyer.

We could see and hear as Harris tapped that the hull was okay, there were no delaminations. But several other problems were obvious. The worst was the pox—blisters thick as weeds on her bottom. Fixing blisters can cost \$200 a foot, or more, and put the boat out of commission for weeks or months.

Air bubbles in the gel coat were visible, particularly along the bottom edge of the rub strake. It was hard for fiberglass applicators to reach that area to roll out the bubbles when the boat was built, Harris said.

Some of the bubbles had been popped and fixed crudely. Many others needed professional repair, which goes for \$50 to \$60 an hour.

Other dings in the hull and on the stem had been poorly repaired. While not a structural threat, they were ugly and needed fixing.

MMC, Taipei-based builder of the Miracle Marine line, took the cheap route in finishing the boat's anchor platform. It didn't have one.

While most trawlers have a teak anchor pulpit protruding over the bulwarks for a salty appearance and ease of handling ground tackle, the MMC builders simply sawed a slot in the bulwarks and propped the anchor in it. That's probably why the stem had been dinged; placing or retrieving an anchor would be difficult with the MMC design.

Not a fatal flaw, but an ugly and somewhat dysfunctional treatment.

Barefoot has a 135 hp Perkins 6-354 diesel engine, which burns about two gallons an hour. She carries 300 gallons of fuel and 100 gallons of water. Conservatively, she carries enough fuel for 800–1,000 miles of cruising. But she will need to stop more often for fresh water.

The Perkins had 1,600 hours of running time on the clock. That indicates she has been lightly used. She carries older electronics, a five kW generator, and an electric stern thruster with 35 pounds of push.

My summary: A good-looking boat with the potential for economical cruising. The bottom blisters represent a costly barrier to an easy sale and worry-free ownership, however.

For families on a budget, a Taiwan-built boat could be appealing, offering a lot for relatively few dollars.

Obviously, such a purchase would require immense patience and an appreciation for the hunt. A prospective buyer would need to develop a strong relationship with expert surveyors and repair yards (it's likely any Taiwan boat on the market will require cosmetic or structural repairs).

In planning that budget, add at least 15 percent to the purchase price to cover the cost of replacements and improvements.

Remember that a Taiwan-built trawler of the kind we're discussing is not a real bluewater yacht. It probably would not be prudent to cast off for Bermuda or the Queen Charlotte Islands in a 34' CHB or Puget Trawler. However, once brought up to specs, those boats should perform superbly on inland, protected, and coastal waters—and provide their owners countless hours of super cruising.

Many, impatient to go boating, will ask "Which is best?" Unfortunately, there is no answer. Matt Harris, the surveyor, has seen them all. His advice: "Buy the latest model you can afford. They did improve."

Because of price and styling, many boaters are eager to buy older Taiwan-built boats.

"There is a big market, a lot of people are looking," Harris said. "They make good cruisers and are reasonably affordable."

Don't ask Harris to nominate a favorite. He can't and won't.

"It's not fair because the boats are so individual," Harris said. "Each boat must be investigated on its merits."

Summary

We're out on Seattle's Lake Union, aboard *Serenity*, kicking up a wake in the speed zone. She runs smoothly, and surprisingly quietly, as Allen pushes the boat to cruising speed in the lane marked by yellow buoys. He slows to make a turn and *Serenity* slices easily through its own wake, the hard chines holding her steady. Not a test of what she'll do in a three-foot chop, but a suggestion that she might do well when whitecaps dance on coastal waters.

Even though it's a cold, gray day, with rain threatening, several other trawler-type boats are out on the lake for a Saturday morning jaunt.

Squinting across the distance, it's obvious that two are siblings or cousins of *Serenity*. Both have the rounded, flared bow and the distinctive bridge styling of so many Taiwan-built trawlers. We know neither is a higher-priced Grand Banks, but the kayakers on the lake and the folks in the houseboats on shore can't tell the difference.

They look good. And, like thousands of other trawlers built in Taiwan, regardless of what name they were sold under, these boats have brought the dream of trawler cruising to many people around the world.

That dream continues today.

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