The Clever Boater – Boat Feature Checklist

Choosing a boat is a difficult task. There are many options to consider, and there is rarely the "Perfect" boat. Here is a list of common features with considerations that can help you decide which features are a priority and which you just don't want! For more information on using this checklist, see our article at: https://TheCleverBoater.com/feature-checklist

Feature	Considerations Level of Importance >	High	Med	Low	Don't Want
SAIL OR POWER	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Sailboat	If the romance of skimming soundlessly over the waves without burning fossil fuel appeals to you, and the prospect of sitting out in the weather pulling on this rope or that doesn't discourage you, then sailboats are for you!	☐	☐	☐	☐
Power Boat	If the prospect of raising and lowering sails is not appealing, or if you want a more expansive living space. If you have limited time when on the water, a power-driven boat may be your best choice.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Catamaran	This is a choice for either Sail or Power. Catamarans give you more room and are more stable in the water. However, catamarans are wide, and finding dockage can be an issue and more expensive. Also, Cats are typically twin engines and are more expensive to purchase and maintain. A catamaran might be an option if you plan to anchor out more than docking in a marina.	☐	☐	☐	☐
NEW OR USED	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
New	New boats come at a premium and depreciate the moment you leave the dock for the first time. While there is some sense of security in knowing that you have a warranty, there is no guarantee that your new boat will be trouble-free.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Used	Used boats have the advantage that the original owner took the initial depreciation in value. The downside is that you usually don't have any warranty, and you don't know how well the prior owner(s) maintained the boat. A good vessel and engine survey will give you a glimpse into the condition, but there are no guarantees.	☐	☐	☐	☐
STYLE	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Sloop Sailboat	This is a very complex and individual choice. If you are not familiar with these styles of boat, see our article "Cruising Boats 101" at: https://TheCleverBoater.com/cruising-boat-types	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ketch Sailboat		☐	☐	☐	☐
Multihull Sailboat		☐	☐	☐	☐
Cruiser		☐	☐	☐	☐
Cuddy Cabin		☐	☐	☐	☐
Downeast		☐	☐	☐	☐
Motorsailer		☐	☐	☐	☐
Motor Yacht		☐	☐	☐	☐
Power Cat		☐	☐	☐	☐
Trawler		☐	☐	☐	☐
Tug		☐	☐	☐	☐
VESSEL LENGTH (Actual length bow pulpit to end of swim platform, not the "Advertised" length.)	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**

Tailorable Pocket Trawlers, Cuddy Cabins	A boat that you can tow on a trailer. It is typically under 28 feet in length, with a beam less than 8.5 feet. You will need a larger vehicle to tow this size boat, but an individual can tow it. If you use a service you can go up in size, but costs can be prohibitive.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Small	From 25 to 32 feet in length. Easy to manage and will fit easily in most marina slips at a nominal expense.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Medium	34-40 feet in length. Needs a larger slip, but will fit in most marinas. Typically will not be towable.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Large	41-48 feet in length. Fits in larger slips. Costs for mooring will be higher. Can be easily handled by a couple.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Yacht	Over 48 feet in length can present issues with finding dock space in some areas. Large slips (50+ feet) are somewhat rare and where available fill up fast. Also, these will typically need a minimum of two people to safely operate.	☐	☐	☐	☐
ENGINES	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Diesel Fuel	While gas engines are more powerful and gas is more available, gasoline comes with significant risks, as gas vaporizes and can cause explosions. In contrast, diesel does not vaporize and is safer. Gas engines are less efficient than diesel engines so that you will use more fuel.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Single Engine	Single-engine boats are more fuel-efficient, but they are generally slower. If fuel costs are more important than time, choose a Single-Engine Boat.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Twin Engine	Twin-engine boats use about 70% more fuel than single-engine boats per mile at comparable speeds. However, twin-engine boats typically have 50% to 75% higher top-end speeds, letting you get where you are going quicker or outrunning bad weather. There is a common belief that having two engines gives you a "backup." While this is partially true, running on one engine in a twin-engine boat takes practice to keep from going in circles. Don't make your decision based on having a backup.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Standup Engine Room	Some boats have stand-up engine rooms where you can easily walk around the engine(s). Others are cramped spaces where you move around on hands and knees and must crawl behind the engine(s) for maintenance. If you have mobility issues, a larger engine is a requirement.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Current Manufacture	Many older boats have engines for which the manufacturer is no longer in business or models for which parts are no longer maintained. While old-stock or third-party parts may be available, they can be very expensive compared to current model engines.	☐	☐	☐	☐
PROPELLER SYSTEM	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Straight Shaft	Straight shafts are your traditional engine, transmission, and propeller arrangement. A single propeller is connected to the transmission by a stainless steel shaft. The propellers point backward and push the boat through the water. The rudder, located behind the propeller, provides steering. These systems are fairly low-maintenance. Replacement in the event of a prop strike or bent shaft usually can be done for a $4,000 - $6,000 dollars.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Pod Drives	Pod drives are different. Here, the transmission is connected to a pod under the boat. The pod swivels giving both propulsion and directional control. On most pods,	☐	☐	☐	☐

(Volvo IPS, Cummins Zeus, ZF Marine, Cat Three60 Pod)	there are two counter-rotating propellers pointing forward. Pods offer increased performance and fuel efficiency as well as the capability of joystick control. Pods can make your boat go sideways! Some systems allow you to push a button and hold position using GPS, for example, when waiting for a bridge. Pod systems are complex and require regular maintenance. Also, if a pod hits a rock or bottom, they are designed to snap off to protect the hull. Replacing a pod can easily run $80,000 or more.				
FIRE SUPRESSION	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Engine Room Fire Suppression	Most boats have a fixed fire suppression system in the engine room. These systems can be automatic or manual. Fire suppression systems must be inspected annually. Depending on the type, their life is 8-10 years.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fire Extinguishers	You are required to have 1 to 3 5-B fire extinguishers on your boat, depending on size (26-39 ft, 2 units; 40-65 ft, 3 units). These must also be inspected annually. Fire extinguishers also expire. More is better!	☐	☐	☐	☐
CO Detectors	It is also required by law for enclosed living spaces: one in each bedroom and one in the salon. Marine CO detectors are calibrated differently than household units, so make sure they are marine grade. Test frequently. Diesel engines can produce CO, and the boat next to you with a gas engine can push CO into your boat. Don't take a chance here!	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fire/Smoke Detectors	Oddly, fire/smoke detectors are not required by law for pleasure vessels. Still, like your home, you should have one in or outside each sleeping area. The USCG says that household units are acceptable for use on pleasure boats.	☐	☐	☐	☐
FLYBRIDGE	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Flybridge	A flybridge gives you more living space on your boat and a higher/better view of the water ahead and around you. Flybridge boats cost more. Maintenance (canvas tops, isinglass enclosures) adds to ongoing costs.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Pilot House	A Pilot House is specific to a few types of boats. If you like the idea of having a raised enclosed area to operate your boat, then a pilot house may be important to you.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Dual Helm	If you choose to have a flybridge, deciding whether to have both an open-air control station and an enclosed weather-protected control station is an important consideration, especially if your flybridge is open to the elements. Dual helms come with added cost, as there are usually two sets of electronics, steering, and engine controls.	☐	☐	☐	☐
BRIGHTWORK (Woodwork)	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Natural Wood	Natural woodwork on the exterior of your boat gives it a classic appearance. Teak railing and decking can be beautiful. Highly varnished transoms, rails, and stairs are beautiful and make your boat stand out. They also come with lots of maintenance. Depending on where you keep your boat, teak may need to be refinished annually. Varnished rails or transoms typically need to be stripped and refinished (we are talking hours of work with a heat gun to strip and 7 or 8 coats of varnish) every couple of years.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Faux Wood	Faux woodwork uses new polymer-based products that, from a distance, appear to be wood but have much lower maintenance. Many new boats use these products to	☐	☐	☐	☐

	reduce the maintenance required. Also, faux finishes are less expensive than real wood finishes.				
None or Minimal	Some boat manufacturers have realized that their customers would rather spend time on the water than sanding and polishing. These boats have no or minimal woodwork to maintain, and they don't have the same classical appeal as boats with brightwork.	☐	☐	☐	☐
BERTHS (Bedrooms)	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Two	Pretty much every Cruising boat will come with at least one bedroom. Most boats over 35 feet will have two, one master and a guest, who can have bunkbeds or split beds. Do you want more than one bedroom?	☐	☐	☐	☐
King Sized Master	We have met people who demand a King-Sized bed in the Master berth. While most boats come with Queen beds, a few offer king-sized beds. If you want a California King, you better start looking at Super Yachts!	☐	☐	☐	☐
VIP Suite	While many boats come with a second or third berth, some have a second bedroom almost as big as the master. Typically, these will have queen-sized beds. This may be a requirement if you want to impress your guest or if your mother-in-law will be cruising with you.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Three or more	Three separate or more separate berths are available on larger boats. If you have a large family, this may be a requirement.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Aft Cabin	An Aft Cabin Berth gives you more room, and are quieter as you don't hear as much wave slap as you do on bow berths. Aft Cabins designs can present issues with access on and off the boat. Look at both styles and see what works for you.	☐	☐	☐	☐
HEADS (Bathrooms)	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Wet Head	Many boats have a combined Sink, Toilet, and Shower. The shower nozzle pulls out from the sink faucet, and you stand next to or sit on the toilet seat cover to shower. While many people think this is a negative, we find that with a quick squeegee after showering, you keep your bathroom nice and shiny clean. Still, some want a separate shower compartment, which is considered a "Dry Head."	☐	☐	☐	☐
Vacu-Flush System	Vacu-Flush systems are like the systems on airplanes minus the blue water. They create pressure, and when you flush, it sucks everything out of the toilet. The plus side is that they are less likely to smell over time, as black water doesn't sit in the hoses and uses less water. The downside is that they are complex, and when they break, it's an expensive and messy process to repair them.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Macerator Flush	The alternative to Vacu-Flush is the macerating pump toilet. Here, when you flush, you pump water (either seawater or fresh water from your tanks) into the toilet. A pump chops up the big stuff and pumps it into your holding tank. These systems are much less complex than Vacu-Flush; however, they use more water and smell a bit more as black water sits in the hoses.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Two+ heads	Many boats will have a master head and a guest or day head. So two toilets. This is great when there are more than two people on board, especially with kids. Also, if one of your heads gets clogged, and it will, you have a spare!	☐	☐	☐	☐
GALLEY	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**

Propane Stove/Oven	Most older boats will come equipped with propane cooktops and ovens. Propane on boats, if used correctly is safe. It's economical, and works really well. A 15 lb tank of propane will last most boaters an entire season. The alternative is electric, which means that you need a large battery bank, and some way to charge it. If you anchor frequently, propane is probably the best choice.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Electric Stove/Oven	Most modern boats offer an all electric option. They have large battery banks and inverters that will provide enough electricity to run an induction cooktop, a convection oven and a microwave. Most are equipped with generators that will power the appliances and charge the batteries. If you anchor frequently you will need to run your generator or rely on solar to keep your batteries charged.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Large Refrigerator	Many boats come with small refrigerators similar to dorm room-sized fridges. They have small freezer compartments. This means that you will need to resupply frequently as limited cold storage is available. Some boats have apartment-sized or even full-sized refrigerators. If you need to keep a lot of food on hand for a large family or because you anchor out for extended periods, this may be a consideration. We have a small fridge (3.5 cu ft) and use a 12-volt Stand Alone Freezer for extra storage.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Large Freezer	If you plan on being at anchor for extended periods or keeping lots of ice cream on hand, then a large freezer is a feature you will want to look for. You can supplement your space with a 12/110 volt stand alone unit like a Dometic CFX series.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ice Maker	Icemakers are common in many boat designs. Those that are built in typically run on 12v off the house battery. You can also get a small 110v counter top unit buy will have to run an inverter when not on shore power.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Washer/Washer Dryer	A common appliance on larger 45+ ft boats and sometimes on smaller. These are typically small Combo units. Many marinas offer laundry facilities. Drying uses a lot of fresh water, so you will need to balance your water needs. We've cruised over 25,000 miles without one.	☐	☐	☐	☐
TANKS	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Fresh Water Tank	Most boats have two fresh water tanks that hold around 100 gallons each. Most boaters use fresh water for showers, cooking, and washing, and some boats use it for flushing the heads. More is better, but remember that water is heavy and can impact performance. Also in summer it can go stale quickly.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hot Water Tank	Boat hot water is usually heated by electric with an auxiliary loop from your engine cooling to heat it when the engines are running. If you have a large family, checking on the hot water capacity may save you from cold showers.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Black Water Tank	If you have a family of 3 girls, a large black water holding tank may be a requirement! Typically boats in the Cruiser Class will have at least a 40 gallon tank. You need to allow about 1.5 gallons per person per day between pump-outs.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Grey Water Tank	Boats don't typically have grey water storage tanks. Grey water (from the sinks, showers, & washer). Grey water is pumped out overboard from a sump in the keel. If a boat has	☐	☐	☐	☐

	a grey water tank, evaluate it's holding capacity and how easy it is to pump out.				
Fuel Tanks Capacity	Take a boat's average fuel use (Gallons Per Hour) and divide that into the total fuel capacity. That will give you an idea of your range (keep a 15% reserve!). Cruisers and standard trawlers have 400-600 gallon tanks as the norm. If you are on an expedition trawler you may want over 1,000 gallons for long crossings. If you anchor frequently and run your generator, don't forget to allow for that fuel usage as well.	☐	☐	☐	☐
ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Air Conditioning	Boats' A/C units run on 110v, so you will need shore power or a generator to operate them. (For most, batteries with capacity to run A/C units are not practical) How many units does your boat have, and how old are they? A/Cs last between 3 and 5 years. Is there enough cooling for the salon and all of the berths?	☐	☐	☐	☐
Heat	If you are a fair-weather boater, heat may not be an issue. However, if you do the Great Loop, there can be some cold (and even snowy) days. Most boats use the reverse cycle on the A/C system to heat the boat, which is sufficient for most. However, if you plan to spend the edge seasons in colder climates, you may want to check if the boat has supplemental electric or diesel heat.	☐	☐	☐	☐
ELECTRICAL SYSTEMS	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
House Batteries	If you anchor out frequently or for extended periods, a large house bank is necessary to avoid running your generator constantly. Also, if properly maintained, most boat batteries have about a 6-8 year lifecycle. How old are the batteries in the boat? What is your 12v electrical load? What is the load with inverter usage? If you always stay in marinas with shore power house, battery capacity is less important.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Alternator Size	If you use your batteries and inverter frequently and want to take advantage of your engines to charge your batteries rather than running your generator, an oversized or second alternator can top up your batteries quickly as you cruise.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inverter Size	The inverter converts your 12v battery power to 110v. Many boats offer inverters in the 900-1500-watt range sufficient to run TVs, microwaves, fans, and other small appliances. If your boat has electrical appliances in the kitchen, you may need a larger inverter or run your generator when cooking.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Generator	Most boats have a generator onboard to charge your house batteries and enable the running of A/C systems and larger electrical appliances. A few things to consider: size, does it produce enough power to run all your A/Cs, space heaters, and fans? Volume, will it keep you or worse, the other boats in the anchorage awake when it's running? What is the age, and has it been well maintained? The generator is less important if you spend most of your time in marinas.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Solar	If you spend a lot of time anchored out in the wilds, solar may be an option to keep your house batteries topped up. Solar will not replace a generator or running your engines unless you have a large array, but it can help. Compare the cost and maintenance of the system with the benefits.	☐	☐	☐	☐
110v Panel Capacity	Boats will typically have either two 30-amp shore power cords or one 50-amp cord. Some of the larger, more modern	☐	☐	☐	☐

	boats may have two 50-amp cords. Most boats will have a 30-amp main breaker on the house 110v panel. This means you can't run the microwave if you are making coffee. If the microwave is running, don't turn on the hair dryer. Don't forget that your battery charger and hot water heater may be running in the background as well. Consider your electrical needs compared to the maximum available on your boat. Also, in some marinas on the Great Loop, no 50 amp power is available. We've had to switch between house power and A/C use because only one 30-amp receptacle was available.				
ELECTRONICS	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Chartplotter	You need some type of navigation system. While using tablets or laptops can be done, they are better as planning tools and to supplemental information. An integrated navigation system gives you the ability to use radar, AIS, and auto-pilot systems. Chartplotters need software and map updates. When was the last update done? Also, many manufacturers sunset support after 8-10 years. Can you still get updates? Replacement electronics can easily reach $10,000 to $20,000.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Auto-Pilot	An autopilot can relieve some of the workload when cruising in open water. Used properly with pre-routing on your chart plotter, it can let you relax a bit and enjoy the ride. However, it is NOT a self-driving tool like a Tesla autopilot! Always be on watch. We've seen many boats end up grounded because they turned on the autopilot and went below to the head.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Radar	For most boaters, radar is not essential. It is useless unless you practice using radar in good weather, as one blob looks like the next. It is useful if you encounter unexpected fog or heavy rain or if you boat after dark and know what you are looking at.	☐	☐	☐	☐
VHF Radio	You are required by law to have at least one VHF radio on board. Most boaters will have a high power built-in radio with external antenna as their primary. Having a second radio, even a hand held is great for chatting with bridges, or monitoring commercial traffic while still listening to channel 16 the hailing channel.	☐	☐	☐	☐
AIS (Automated Identification System)	AIS is fast becoming a necessity in pleasure boating, especially on the Great Loop Route. AIS allows you to be aware of other boats in your vicinity, and they can be aware of you. Unlike radar, AIS gives you useful information like the boat name, size, speed, distance, and direction of travel. It is great to know about a big tow boat with barges around a bend before you can see each other. We are frequently hailed on the radio by tows to arrange safe passing because they can see us on AIS.	☐	☐	☐	☐
ENTERTAINMENT	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
AM/FM/Bluetooth/Satellite Sound System	If you like to rock to your favorite tunes while cruising, an integrated sound system may be a requirement. Sound systems and speakers need to be marine-grade to withstand the environment. Many have SiriusXM satellite radio as an option and can be connected to chartplotters for XM Satellite Weather integration.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Digital TV Antenna	Many boats have a digital TV receiver on the mast. Unless you are in a large metro area, these are fairly useless, as the number of digital stations available is quite small, and the signals are not very strong. Re-tuning is time-consuming.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Satellite TV (DirecTV/Dish TV)	Satellite TV receivers are popular among cruisers. These are dome antennas mounted on the boat's roof or mast. Equipment can cost several thousand dollars, and subscriptions are typically over $100 per month. However, they work just about anywhere, and they can be paused when not in use.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Internet Hot Spot	Some boaters install internet hotspot antennas on their masts to improve the reception of cellular signals. With the advent of 5G, service in most of the USA is good except for very rural areas. US residents may find services in Canada expensive or unavailable. With the internet, streaming TV services are an economical way of getting TV coverage.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Wi-Fi Booster	Another popular option is a Wi-Fi booster on the mast to amplify weak marina Wi-Fi signals. Marina Wi-Fi is hit or miss. Some have excellent service, some poor, or none. Also, you are competing for limited bandwidth with other boaters during peak periods. Some marinas do not allow streaming.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Starlink Satellite Internet	Starlink has been a game changer for boat internet access. As of late 2024, Starlink has mobile and marine antennas and plans. With Starlink, you get internet access and can use streaming TV services. Antennas have gotten small, and the service works in the US, Canada, and the Bahamas with an updated subscription.	☐	☐	☐	☐
DINGHY/TENDER	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Dinghy/Tender	If you anchor out, you need a dinghy to get to shore, especially if you have pets that need shore patrol. Aside from shore access from anchoring, most boaters rarely use their dinghy, so if you usually stay in marinas, you may not need one.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Davits	Davits allow you to access your dinghy more easily. They typically hang off the back of the transom or swim platform. This can be beneficial if you use your dinghy frequently. However, davits can also block access to your swim platform and make getting on and off the boat difficult.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hoist or Winch	A hoist or winch system lets you lift your dinghy up to the boat's roof, getting it out of the way. Some boats use a manual block and tackle arrangement, and some use electric winches. Electric winches are highly beneficial if you keep your dinghy on the roof and access it frequently.	☐	☐	☐	☐
THRUSTERS	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Bow Thruster	Bow thrusters are very common on cruising boats. While not required, they allow maneuvering in tight spaces around docks and in locks, especially in windy or high current conditions. Bow thrusters can be added but at considerable expense.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Stern Thruster	The stern thruster is less common but highly desirable. It works the same way as the bow thruster and provides extra maneuverability. Combined with a bow thruster, it is possible to move a boat sideways into tight slips or keep	☐	☐	☐	☐

	against a lock wall in winds or currents. Stern thrusters are relatively easy to add as they bolt onto the boat's transom.				
ANCHOR	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Anchor Types	You are required to have at least one anchor. Anchor types are a highly debated topic in the cruising community.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Multiple Anchors	If you anchor frequently in different bottom conditions or in tight spaces where you might want to deploy a bow and stern anchor to prevent swinging, carrying multiple anchors is a consideration.	☐	☐	☐	☐
STABILIZERS	**Importance >**	**High**	**Med**	**Low**	**No!**
Gyro Stabilizers (Seakeeper)	Gyro Stabilizers help dampen roll (left to right) and some pitch (front to back). They work both when moving and when at anchor, making them popular with fishermen. Gyros require a lot of power, so a generator is typically required to run them.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fin Stabilizers	Fin Stabilizers stick out from the sides of the hull and deal primarily with roll control. Fins are only useful when you are moving and typically at slower speeds. Most Fins are hydraulic and run off a pump attached to your engine.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rotor Swing Stabilizers	Similar to fins, rotor stabilizers stick out the side of the boat but use the lift and centrifugal force to reduce roll. Some of these systems work best when moving; however, some work when anchored as well.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Trim Tab Stabilizers (Seakeeper Ride)	Relatively new on the market are high-bred trim tabs that are computer-controlled and counteract both pitch and roll motion. These stabilizers are transom-mounted and can be retrofitted with relative ease. However, they are only effective when moving.	☐	☐	☐	☐