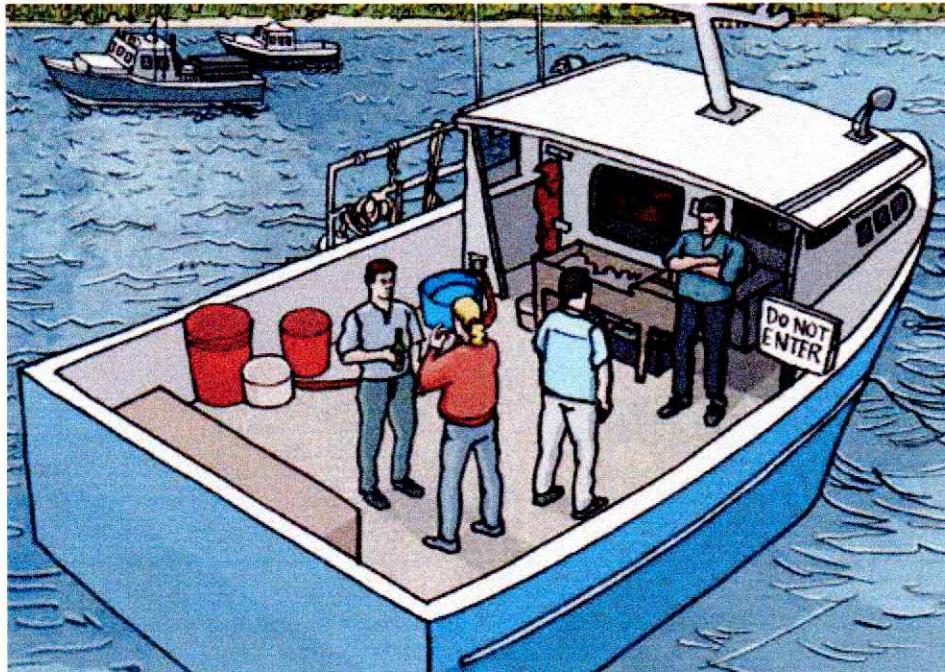


Railing for Safety

Building a boat that's "good enough" for light use is not good enough for real cruising.



As I write this, it's midwinter boat show season, at least in Florida. I found myself wandering the docks, pausing before one of the new breed of small trawlers. One particular boat, thankfully, didn't call itself a fast cruiser, an oxymoron right up there with jumbo shrimp or deafening silence. The idea of "cruising" at 30-plus knots is just as contradictory as saying "small crowd."

I decided to go aboard after admiring long rows of drink holders, which, perhaps, are a necessity for fast cruising. Then, I noticed a sign on the rail next to the boarding gate: "Please do not pull on the rail when boarding."

Being a perverse sort, I considered this warning and then decided to test my suspicions. I used the rail to lever myself (at a weight the Brits would politely describe as 14 stone) to deck level.

Remember the sound when the front door of Frankenstein's castle opened? That same heavy creak and groan emanated from somewhere under the deck. The young salesman in the cockpit paled. He gets points for not yelling at me.

As I wandered through the boat's cabin, I tried to see what was underneath those stanchions, but the fancy headliner covered everything. I couldn't see whether the bolts had backing plates or were simply held in place with duct tape.

What I know for certain is that if the builder and dealer don't trust those rails at a mirror-smooth boat show dock, then I sure as hell won't trust them past the 20-fathom line on a rough day.

There's an unfortunate "good enough" attitude on the part of some builders who know that most cruisers don't actually

cruise. These builders anticipate nothing more than afternoon outings on pleasant days or waterfront vacation homes where boats never leave the dock.

Rails aren't the only problem with this type of thinking. The expanses of shiny fiberglass on cabin tops sparkle with fresh wax at boat shows, but when you're punching into head seas and throwing spray the length of the boat, any surface without seriously aggressive nonslip where you might place your foot is a no-man's land. You may have paid a fortune for those boat shoes, but they're skates on slick surfaces.

Speaking of nonslip, I believe in ferociousness with its application. Think 20-grit sandpaper and you're close. I have quilted aluminum foil in my kitchen with better nonslip properties than I've seen aboard

many boats, which seem designed for easy cleaning. I want nonslip that removes skin like a hungry piranha if I do fall, but that's better than going for an unexpected swim with land beyond my dog-paddle.

And what's with these flimsy grab rails? Boaters need to move around, inside and outside, in lumpy conditions. If you can't walk from the stern to the bow without a gap in the hand rails where you must let go, then something is seriously wrong.

Sure, I know you're wearing your life vest and your safety harness that you carefully unsnap and reconnect as you move around. Oh, wait, I don't know that, because too many people just don't bother.

A Formula One legend once said that a race driver must have no imagination because he would never get in a car if he could imagine hitting a wall at 200 mph. That same rule applies to boats. Trust me on this one: I've gone overboard, far offshore. Watching that little stern light disappear over a wave into blackness was terrifying. I believe I was saved because I owed several of the crew money.

The point is that these boat features are essential for cruising safety. Stanchions and lifelines must withstand a husky person (all 14 stone) falling against them, and ought to tear out a huge chunk of deck before giving way. The nonslip should skin your knees because anything less is worse than useless. Handrails should be everywhere.

I'd much prefer to see a sign that states: "Please pull hard on the rails when boarding." Then, I'd trust the rest of the boat. ♦