

Best Boat Improvements

When we bought *¿Qué Tal?*, our Tayana 37, in 2002 she was already well-equipped for cruising. She had radar, a cruising chute and storm jib, good ground tackle, a SSB and modem, both 12-volt and engine-driven refrigeration, hydraulic autopilot, Monitor wind vane, 150 watts of solar power, and a 450-amp-hour battery bank. Still, Dave and I set aside about 25% of our "boat budget" for upgrades. Our plan was to cruise with the boat as is for a year, decide what we'd like to change, and then begin the improvements.

I'm glad we did, as our priorities turned out to be very different than we expected before leaving the marina. Three of our biggest projects were undertaken to substantially decrease our maintenance time. In talking to cruising friends, this seems to be an issue that we all underestimate before heading out. The reality is, however, that the cruisers who enjoy the lifestyle the most are those who have found ways to decrease the daily chores. Other projects were done for safety, convenience and yes, fun!

Our "five best" improvements – along with three honorable mentions – are detailed below, along with six other projects undertaken by friends on their boats – all but one of which we've also adopted on *¿Qué Tal?*.

Semco: Decreasing Teak Maintenance

The Project: Using Semco teak sealer to treat our exterior teak instead of varnish, Cetol or teak oil.

Advantages: Considerably less time spent on maintenance, while still protecting the teak.

Cost: About \$500 to remove our old Cetol (hiring local workers), \$50 twice a year for maintenance coats (doing it ourselves).

¿Qué Tal? has a lot of exterior teak, and maintaining it took hours of work. In our first year of cruising, we quickly came to the conclusion that we weren't willing to spend the time that varnish or Cetol required, we didn't have the money to hire it done, but we did want the boat to look nice and protect the teak. We switched to Semco teak sealer over two years ago and are very happy with the results.

Semco reminds me of Thompson's Water Seal[®], but it's designed specifically for teak in a salt water environment. It is not an oil, and won't turn gummy or attract dirt the way some oils can. The initial application requires that you remove any existing finish, generally by sanding down to bare wood and then washing with a strong soap. After that, however, there is no sanding and no taping. When water stops beading up on the wood surface, generally after about 6 months in tropical sun and rains, it's time for a maintenance coat. Application is simple: just wash off the wood surface with fresh water, let it dry and apply the Semco. If your boat is particularly dirty, you may want to wash it with soap first. No special brushing techniques or expensive brushes are needed – in fact, you can use a foam or bristle brush, a rag or even an old sock. If the Semco drips onto fiberglass, you can just wipe it off with a rag. If you miss a drip and it dries, you can remove it with rubbing alcohol.



A close-up of our teak, about a month after applying a maintenance coat of Semco. Most of the other photos of *¿Qué Tal?* show the Semco at a distance.

Semco-treated teak looks like natural wood, but doesn't grey or turn black. It comes in several shades and also clear. Every six months, it takes only about 12 hours of work to put two coats on all of *¿Qué Tal?*'s exterior teak, start to finish.

Removal of Teak Deck Overlay

The Project: Removing the teak deck overlay, replacing it with custom-made fiberglass non-skid and repainting the decks.

Advantages: No screw holes to leak water into our decks, possibly causing delamination; no need to re-caulk the teak decks periodically; no daily wetting the deck down with salt water to keep it swollen up (and thus much less frequent need to polish our stanchions as well); much cooler decks meaning we can walk barefoot on deck and the cabin is cooler; and can catch rainwater off the deck.

Cost: \$5500 total: \$4200 to remove the teak and epoxy the fiberglass panels down; \$1300 to paint the deck and coach house roof with Sterling. We removed and replaced the deck hardware and bowsprit ourselves. Prices reflect having the work done in La Paz, Mexico – prices in the US are double or more.

When we bought *¿Qué Tal?*, we thought that her teak decks looked traditional and "nautical." Soon we learned that they were also so hot that we couldn't go on deck barefoot and Dave had to douse the decks daily with saltwater to keep the wood swollen up and the caulk tight. Not only did that mean hauling up 5 or 6 buckets of salt water, it also meant that all of our deck-level stainless such as cleats and stanchion bases quickly rusted and needed polishing. Over the years, the bungs covering the screws had worn down, leaving them paper thin and prone to flaking off. Every week, we'd find new screws that had to be removed, set in deeper, epoxied over and a new bung placed in. We knew it was only a matter of time before water started seeping into the deck core.

All told, we were spending at least 3 hours a week on maintenance related to the teak deck, plus had the heat issue and potentially a deck delamination problem. We knew we had to at least re-caulk the deck and talked to Reggie Brilliant, a carpenter in La Paz, Mexico who has developed a reputation for both his work refurbishing teak decks and also replacing them with fiberglass. After discovering that the cost to re-caulk the deck would be over half the cost to replace the teak, our decision was made. The work took about three weeks.

We now have virtually no maintenance time associated with our deck and the entire boat is cooler. An added benefit of the project is that when we were in El Salvador for the rainy season, we could scrub down the deck and catch rain water for our tank using the whole deck. Boats



¿Qué Tal?'s new fiberglass nonskid is much better suited to cruising in the tropics than her old teak deck. Our only regret is that we didn't replace the brown TreadMaster at the same time to further cool the decks and boat.

with teak decks never felt that the decks were clean enough for that, and thus had to rig canvas raincatchers that were not as efficient.

Large Array of Solar Panels

The Project: Adding 300 watts of solar panels, for a total of 453 watts.

Advantages: Energy provided almost always comes within 10 amp-hours a day of energy used, and often fully charges the batteries. Except in long rainy spells spent in one anchorage, we never run the engine just to charge the batteries.

Cost: \$2400, including mounting brackets, wiring, charge controller, marine electrician and doing part of the installation ourselves.

While we watch our energy consumption, *¿Qué Tal?* is our home – and our lifestyle reflects that. We have a decent-sized refrigerator/freezer, a 12-volt watermaker, a computer, SSB and modem, and we often watch DVD movies with a bag of microwave popcorn. We do it all off solar power, now that we have 453 watts.

Before adding the extra panels, we ran our engine 4 hours every two days to keep up with our energy demand. It was noisy, hot and expensive – both in dollars for the fuel, oil, filters and supplies and in time to get the diesel fuel, fill the tank, change the oil and so on. We were also putting a lot of hard hours on the diesel, accelerating the time when we'd need a complete rebuild.

The extra panels – 300 more watts – paid for themselves in less than 2 years, plus we have over two hours more free time per week in time not spent doing engine maintenance. Additionally, the solar panels charge the batteries whether we're on board or off hiking or snorkeling. They're silent and don't generate heat, a big plus in the tropics which translates into energy savings with the refrigerator and fans. The solar panels really proved their worth on two separate occasions when the alternator and voltage regulator each died. Since we still had plenty of power, the repairs were an inconvenience, not an emergency. Hands down, this is the best improvement we have made.



In a sunny climate, our solar panels provide all the power we need. While there is less sun in the winter months, our demand for power is also less as it's not as hot and the refrigerator and fans run less.

Stainless Steel Racks for Jerry Cans

The Project: Stainless steel racks to securely hold our jerry cans on the gunwales and off the side decks.

Advantages: Clear the side decks for crew getting to the foredeck and hold jerry cans much more securely than when tied to lifelines.

Cost: \$400 (for racks on both port and starboard) plus strap materials

All jerry cans need to be kept securely and any jerries containing fuel need to have adequate ventilation. Most boats don't have a locker that meets these requirements and so jerry cans end up tied on deck. Not only do they make it difficult getting to the foredeck, they are susceptible to being swept away in any kind of rough weather. After trying a number of other solutions on *¿Qué Tal?*, we had stainless jerry can racks built between two stanchions.



¿Qué Tal? has 4 diesel and 4 gas jerry cans, an extra gas tank for the outboard and a jerry can of water. Port and starboard jerry can racks store them all securely and out of the walkways.

The weight of the cans rests on the gunwale, with the lifelines forming the inside restraint and two stainless rails the outside. Each can is double-strapped to the stainless. The only disadvantage is that since we have them on both sides of the boat, we can no longer tie up along a seawall, as they are wider than the hull itself and our fenders would not adequately protect them.

VHF Remote Microphone in Cockpit

The Project: Install a new VHF base station that had remote mike capability, and put a remote mike where the helmsman could reach it in the cockpit.

Advantages: Having a full power VHF in the cockpit, instead of a low-power handheld. Useful underway, when entering harbors, and at anchor.

Cost: \$300 (installed ourselves)

For almost three years, we used our handheld VHF in the cockpit and weren't happy. It didn't have enough power to reach ships any distance away when on passage, so we had to use the VHF at the nav station and turn the volume up so the person on deck could hear calls. This, in turn, would wake the off-watch person whenever there was traffic, and if the call was for us, the

helmsman would have to come below to reply. We tried using an adapter, long coax and antenna splitter so the handheld could utilize the masthead antenna, but there still wasn't enough range to be practical. I know we spent more on work-around solutions than the cost of the real solution!

We finally bought a Standard Horizon Quest+ base station VHF and RAM mike. The wiring harness and antenna were already in place from the old VHF, so installation was quick and easy. It took less than a half day, including modifying the installation bracket to fit our location and running the wiring and installing the remote microphone.

Since the volume for the base station and the remote mike/speaker can be independently controlled, transmissions don't bother the off watch below.

Additionally, the person at the helm always has the VHF right at hand – a big plus when a trip below to the nav station just isn't practical. A further advantage is that we can listen to the morning net or answer calls from friends from the cockpit when at anchor – no more having to scramble down the companionway!



Entering a harbor or in the middle of traffic, it's nice to be able to talk on the VHF without leaving the wheel.

Honorable Mentions

Two other improvements deserve mention, but have been discussed in detail in other issues of *Cruising World*: improving our ground tackle (see "Ultimate Storm Anchoring," June 2005, [PDF available on The Boat Galley](#)); and adding a track-mounted whisker pole ([PDF available on The Boat Galley](#)). (NOTE: I had originally proposed including our 4-way wind scoop as one of our best improvements, but CW had recently done a wind scoop article. For info on the 4-way, see my article on [Ventilation on TheBoatGalley](#).)

Other Improvements

Some of the best ideas come from our friends, and we've copied all the ideas below except for the larger dinghy – haven't figured out how to do it, but we sure do have dinghy envy!

Waterproof Housing for Digital Camera



From: Jan Irons aboard *Winterlude*, a Passport 37

"I love to take photos underway (the more spray the better), in the dinghy and from my kayak. With a waterproof housing, I don't have to worry about getting

the camera wet! It's small enough that I leave the camera in it all the time and I think it helps prevent damage from dust and salty air."

Cost: \$250 to \$300, depending on model

Source: www.oceanbrite.com – Housings are available for many specific camera makes and models and there are also some "universal" housings. Most are good down to 100 feet or so.



Waterproof housings provide much better camera protection than a plastic bag – and aren't necessarily huge. Jan's housing, from Olympus, even lets her use filters.

Solar Anchor Lights



From: Robin and Martin Hardy aboard *The Cat's Meow*, a 52' custom trawler

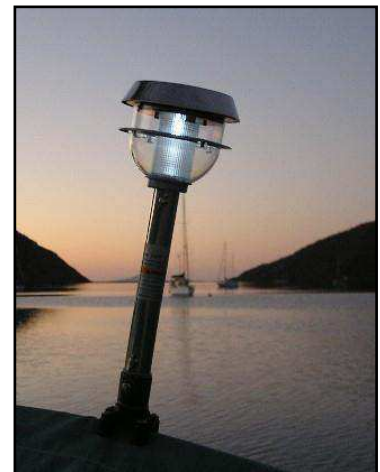
"Even though we're a power boat, we try to conserve electricity. We found nice stainless steel LED yard lights that are solar powered and use them for our anchor lights.

A number of other cruisers in this area are doing this – they're a lot cheaper than many of the other low-power-draw options. Ours come on automatically at dusk and shut off at dawn, so the only thing we have to do is clean them off every once in a while."

NOTE: Most solar lights will not meet the "anchor light" requirements if you are anchored outside a designated anchorage, so you will still need your traditional anchor light on those occasions.

Cost: \$10 to \$20, plus any materials needed for mounting.

Source: Most hardware and garden stores – get ones made from stainless steel and/or plastic, and with the brightest light possible. Robin notes that the clear lights are much more visible than the amber ones.



Solar-powered yard lights make great anchor lights, taking no power and turning themselves on and off.

Pack Style Mainsail Cover



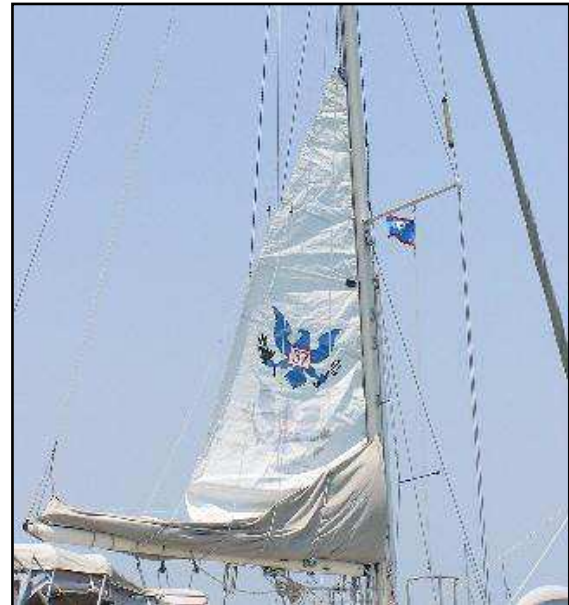
From: Jan and David Irons aboard *Winterlude*, a Passport 37

"Before adding our Mack Pack, dropping the sail in wind or waves meant fighting to keep it on deck

and flaking as it came down. We were always concerned that one of us would get knocked off the boat and safety took precedence over looks when we made the decision to add it. It also makes it much more practical to use the main for short hops, because it doesn't take so long to raise and lower it and put it away."

Cost: About the same as a similar-size traditional mainsail cover.

Source: Most canvas shops and sailmakers have their own version of a pack-style cover. Ask to see their work on other boats and talk to the owners to see how satisfied they are and if they'd make any changes in the design.



With *Winterlude's* pack-style mainsail cover, the sail lowers right into the cover with lazyjacks guiding it. Once the sail is down, they just zip the cover up. Raising the sail is also simple – just unzip and hoist.

Large Planing Dinghy



From: Royce and Pam Hagerman, aboard *RDreamz*, a 50' steel schooner

"The larger, faster dinghy has several advantages for us. Long dinghy trips to dive and snorkel spots are

faster and safer, even when we're loaded with gear. The large tubes make the ride drier, too, for hauling provisions and laundry. And we can take a bunch of friends along when exploring. The dinghy is an 11' Aquapro RIB with a 15-horse Suzuki 4-stroke, and it planes well even fully loaded. We tried a 9-horse motor, but there just wasn't enough oomph."



A three-mile trip to a sea lion colony is much faster and safer in *RDreamz* dinghy – and taking friends along adds to the fun.

Cost: List price about \$6,500 new

Satellite Radio – XM or Sirius

From: Mike and Tonya Rickman aboard *Amazing Grace*, a Prout 37 catamaran

"Satellite radio is perfect for a cruising boat. Not only are the music choices great, but the news and sports channels are perfect for keeping up with what's going on when you're outside the US. We are big NASCAR fans and listen to all the races in their entirety, even in the most remote anchorages."

Cost: \$50 to several hundred for the hardware depending on the type selected (look for rebates); about \$150 per year for subscription (shorter terms are also available).

Note: Both XM and Sirius say they have coverage only in the continental US. However, good signals can be received in many other popular cruising grounds in both the Caribbean and Pacific – check with other cruisers in your area.



Mike and Tonya (on either side of the swim ladder) host a NASCAR party aboard – or rather astern of – *Amazing Grace* at a remote anchorage in the Sea of Cortez.

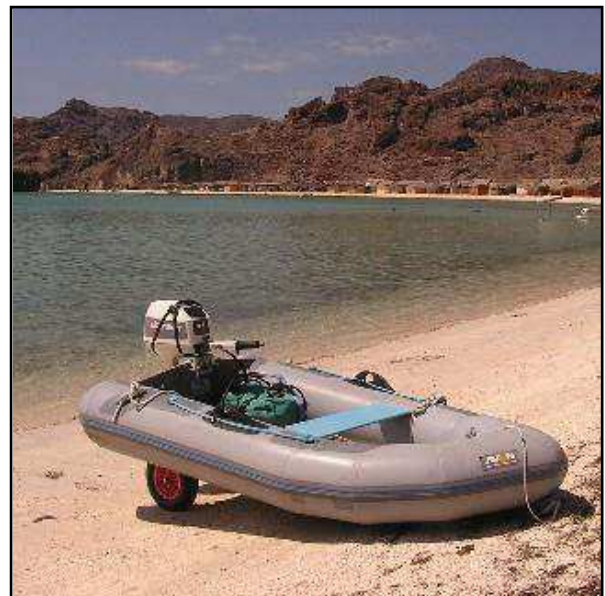
Dinghy Wheels



From: Dick and Judi Frank, aboard *Corazon de Acero*, a self-built 40' steel cutter

"Outside the US, dinghy docks are few and far between. Most often, we pull dinghies up on sand beaches and large inflatable tires make it easy. They are on a pivot so that they flip up out of the water when underway, and then we lock them down when we get close to the beach. Since the wheels are lower than the prop, they also help keep it from getting dinged."

Cost: \$150 to \$200 – the more expensive ones have a spring-loaded quick release mechanism that makes it much easier to raise and lower the wheels.



Dinghy wheels make it easy to pull the dink up on shore – helpful anywhere, but especially if you're cruising an area with large tides.

Source: West Marine has wheels without the quick release mechanism (the wheels pin up or down); the only source I've found for the quick release wheels is Adventure Marine, available online at www.adventuremarine.net.