

# 12 BOATING TRENDS FOR 2023

Innovative engineering and technological breakthroughs are making boating easier, safer and more comfortable than ever. Here are a dozen emerging trends to watch for at this fall's boat shows.

BY CRAIG RITCHIE

## 1 GREATER AUTONOMY

If there's one area where we've seen huge advances recently, it's in boats having greater degrees of autonomy. Where it used to take boat owners time to learn how to do even basic things, now most functions are completely automatic. Amenities like automatic trim adjust the engine while underway, so passengers enjoy a smooth ride without requiring any tinkering on the part of the driver. Similarly, today's joystick piloting systems allow anyone to dock the boat like a pro the first time out, and without regard for the effects of winds, currents or boat wakes.

While fully autonomous, self-driving boats are still a few years off, they are definitely on the horizon with several boat and engine companies already working toward bringing the technology to market.



## 2 USB CHARGERS EVERYWHERE

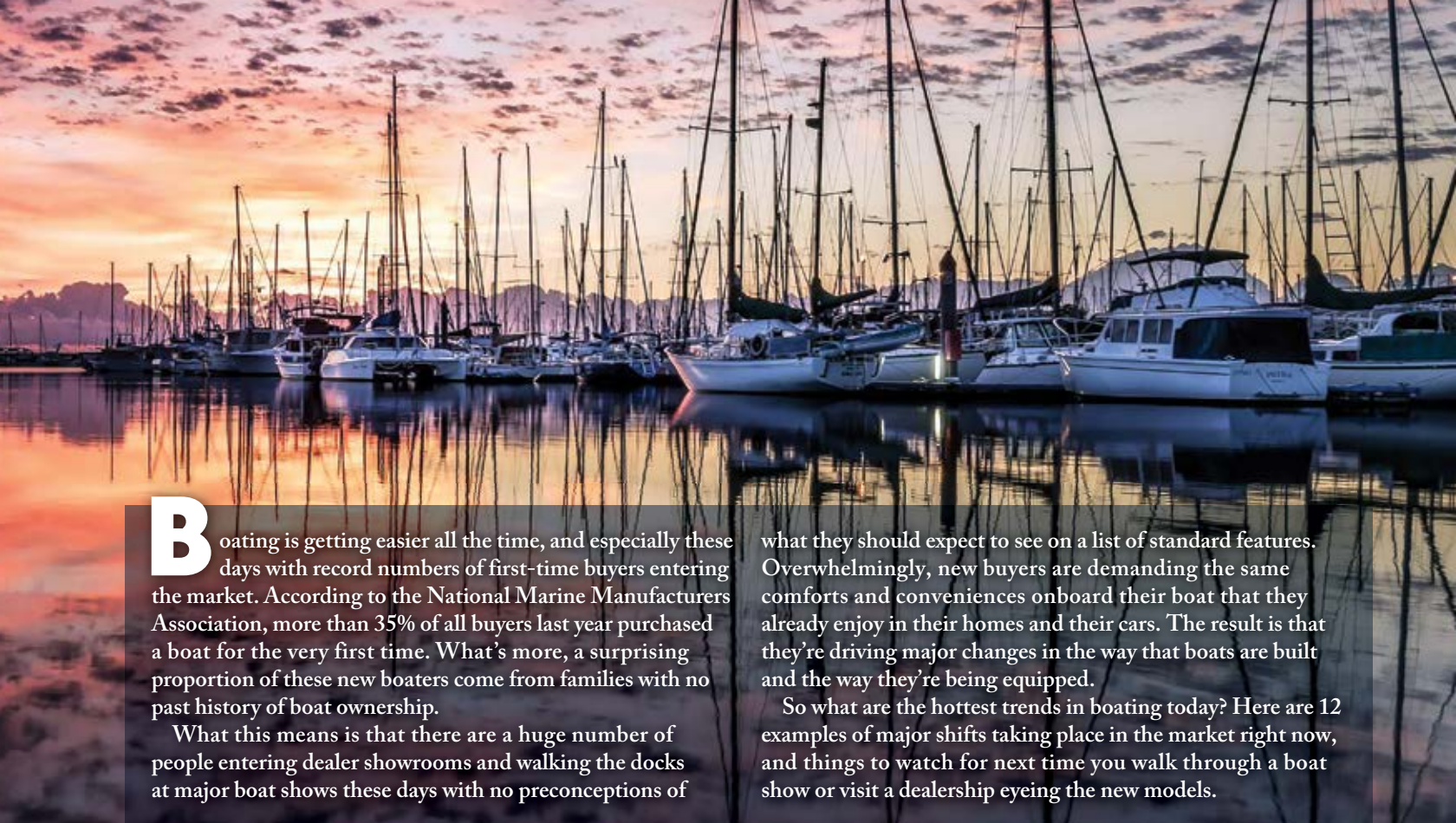
In a world where we all rely so heavily on our mobile phones, portable tablets and digital watches, no one ever wants to run out of juice. That's why boats today now come with more power outlets and charging options than ever.

Where most boats used to come with a single 12V outlet at the helm, today it's far more common to find them with multiple USB ports located throughout the boat so that multiple devices can be charged at once. Wireless charging pads have also found their way onboard more and more boats, providing even greater convenience.



MAIN PHOTO COURTESY OF PIXABAY; AUTONOMY PHOTO COURTESY OF MERCURY MARINE; USB PHOTO BY CRAIG RITCHIE





**B**oating is getting easier all the time, and especially these days with record numbers of first-time buyers entering the market. According to the National Marine Manufacturers Association, more than 35% of all buyers last year purchased a boat for the very first time. What's more, a surprising proportion of these new boaters come from families with no past history of boat ownership.

What this means is that there are a huge number of people entering dealer showrooms and walking the docks at major boat shows these days with no preconceptions of

what they should expect to see on a list of standard features. Overwhelmingly, new buyers are demanding the same comforts and conveniences onboard their boat that they already enjoy in their homes and their cars. The result is that they're driving major changes in the way that boats are built and the way they're being equipped.

So what are the hottest trends in boating today? Here are 12 examples of major shifts taking place in the market right now, and things to watch for next time you walk through a boat show or visit a dealership eyeing the new models.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NAUTIQUE

### 3 CAMERAS EVERYWHERE

YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and a hundred other social media platforms confirm we like to stay in touch with friends, and particularly by sharing our daily activities. As a result, boats are increasingly being designed with integral cameras and mounts for capturing those moments. Most connect via onboard Wi-Fi to either a multifunction display at the helm or a remote app on a linked smartphone, allowing us to stream the day's accomplishments live as they happen.



### 4 REMOTE CONTROL, ONBOARD AND OFF

While transom remotes for the onboard stereo have been around for a while, more recently wireless remote controls have caught on in a big way and are a fast-emerging trend on many boats. Wi-Fi technology allows wakesurfers to control the attributes of their surf wave right from a smart watch, for example, controlling its height, direction and pitch. Phone apps and digital switching capabilities now allow some boat owners to control onboard electrical functions from home — remotely turning on the power to the air conditioning and the onboard fridge, for example, so everything's nice and cool by the time they arrive at the dock.





# 5

## STABILIZERS FOR THE MASSES

It used to be that stabilizer systems only existed for cruise ships and huge luxury yachts. But now, wave-taming stabilizers can be found in boats down to around 20 feet. Gyroscopic devices, which mount out of sight in a floor cavity or unused storage compartment, spin at an incredibly high rate of speed to counteract choppy water, balancing the boat in the waves and reducing roll by up to 95%. Although they're not cheap, the devices make such a difference in onboard comfort that they're rapidly becoming table stakes on high-end boats. More recently, less expensive vessel attitude control systems like the Seakeeper Ride promise to eliminate up to 70% of pitch and roll while underway, truly bringing stabilization to the masses.

# 6

## BUILT FOR KIDS

Today's boats are more kid-friendly than ever, reflecting the fact that the vast majority of them continue to be bought for family fun. Amenities for little ones include features like extended swim platforms for a running start on wicked cannonballs and space for carrying toys like inflatable tubes or Lilypad rolls. Fast-drying woven floors better accommodate wet swimmers getting in and out of the boat than traditional carpet, while stain-resistant vinyls used in seating mean a dropped hot dog loaded with ketchup and mustard doesn't turn into a permanent mess.



# 7

## LOW MAINTENANCE, PLEASE

Busy families want to spend their time enjoying the boat — not cleaning it or maintaining it. That's a big reason we're seeing a steady move away from carpeted floors in boats and toward vinyls and PVC flooring like SeaDek. Apart from being more durable than carpet, synthetics are far easier to clean. End-of-day cleanups require nothing more than a quick squirt with a garden hose — or increasingly, a built-in onboard sprayer for this very purpose. The water simply runs out the floor drains taking all the sand and debris with it, leaving the boat looking like-new in just a few minutes.

# 8

## INCREASED TELEMATICS

Making life aboard as easy as possible extends to keeping track of the boat's usage. Increasingly, this is being left to an app on the owner's smartphone, which tracks how much the boat is being used in order to keep tabs on its hours, so the app can let owners know when they're coming due for basic maintenance items like oil changes. The app can even connect to the local dealership, so they can schedule the work when it's most convenient to the boat owner. These apps are great, and replace the old dashboard logbook for good.



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM. PHOTOS COURTESY OF SEAKEEPER, SMOKECRAFT, BOSTON WHALER, MERCURY MARINE

# 9

## MORE SUN PROTECTION

Everybody likes to get out in the summer sun, but not to the point we start to burn. That's why more and more boats today come with some sort of sunshade as a standard feature or a highly attractive option.

Hardtops, Bimini tops, pole shades and even power retractable awnings all provide a break from the midday heat, and are increasingly being included as standard features onboard new boats. But they're also highly popular retrofit items that can be easily added to any vessel.

Probably the fastest-growing trend right now is the power Bimini top. Putting up the Bimini can be a chore for even experienced boaters, but the power top makes deploying or retracting the top push-button easy. Now that's cool.



# 10

## WASHROOMS

While washrooms on boats are nothing new, washrooms on smaller boats certainly are, and they're a fast-growing trend in boating worldwide. Thanks to some innovative engineering, today increasingly smaller vessels like center consoles, pontoons and even inflatables come with facilities — a very welcome addition that's appreciated by just about everyone.

# 11

## MULTIFUNCTION SEATING

Big comfy seats are a great thing to have onboard, but they do eat up a lot of space on a boat. That's why we're seeing new approaches to seating that provide more functionality and better space utilization. Seats that fold out of the way when they're not needed have become extremely popular, particularly on fishing boats where room in the cockpit is always at a premium.

But space-saving seating has even become popular on pontoon boats, where rear sun loungers can adjust to provide forward- or aft-facing seating as well, or fold up to become an onboard bar.



# 12

## GLASS HELMS

Forget the old days of endless dials and gauges — boats today present all the information the driver needs on one or more touchscreen, multifunction displays. Styled like the cockpit of a jet fighter, these so-called glass helms not only provide a much cleaner look and simplified operation, but allow boat builders to present even more information in less space.

Using familiar smartphone-like gestures and icons, boaters can easily navigate through the glass helm menus to display engine data, GPS maps, fish finder information or just change the music on the stereo — all with just the flick of a finger. What's more, because the helm has now been fully digitized, almost everything can also be remotely controlled through a phone app or even a smart watch. Talk about convenience! ★