



Interior Decorating for Salty Sailors

A boat's interior is too small to hide an egregious decorating mistake. Consulting a pro is the best route

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CLARK BEEK

» WE SALTY SAILORS DON'T TALK about this subject. We talk about 3/8-inch high-test anchor chain, 1,500-gallon-per-hour bilge pumps, two-part linear polyurethane topside paint, and Kevlar-cored yacht braid, but not this. One sailor would never walk down the dock and ask another, "Do you think this periwinkle-flecked chenille would clash with the pillows in my settee?" It just doesn't happen, but it's time it did. The choices made for a boat's interior and cockpit décor can do more for its overall appearance than all the varnishing and painting in the world, and with much less effort.

I decided it was time to start taking interior decorating seriously after I re-covered the settee cushions on my 40-foot ketch. I thought I had a feel for what I wanted, took my curtains to an upholsterer to compare them with the various fabric samples, and made a choice accordingly. I had in mind a sort of retro sea-moss green to go with my 1960s boat's retro interior. What I got was a sea of lime green; I can live with it, barely, but it certainly isn't what I had in mind. It just looks so different when you're comparing those little swatches.

Patty Walker of Walker Interiors in San Diego, California, has decorated some of the

best and seen some of the worst. She helped me on my way to understanding the relevant principles of interior design and the state of the art for boat interiors.

The basics

Every beginning student learns the gospel of interior-design principles, which mostly give guidance on the quantity and placement of objects in a room, letting in more light, and where the eye is drawn upon entering a space. Few of them pertain to boats. On a sailboat you're pretty much stuck with what you've got for furniture and natural lighting, and none of it is going to be changed or rearranged without a chainsaw. The eye will be drawn to the helm, the squall, or the liquor cabinet, depending on the time of day.

The principles that apply to sailboats are proportion, scale, and color. Without a major construction job, these principles can be applied only to cushions, cabin soles, and window coverings. This makes the job fairly simple, but there's still plenty of room to screw it up with bad decisions.

Proportion

The Greeks discovered the golden mean thousands of years ago, and it applies to all things in the visual world. It says that you should have about 70 percent of any one thing, 25 percent of a related thing, and just 5 percent of a contrasting thing. In the case of the average sailboat's interior, much of what you see will be wood (the 70 percent thing); then you can cover your cushions with something that works with wood (the 25 percent item) and throw in a contrasting color for your curtains and/or a few throw pillows (the 5 percent thing). Follow the golden mean and the proportions will look right to the eye.

Scale

Most sailboat interiors and cockpits represent some level of smallness, and this is why a bad decorating decision can reverberate like a keel dragging on a reef. The way to deal with these small spaces is to reduce clutter and thus open them up. Scale is easy to understand with this example: Imagine a wide-striped fabric, say 2-inch-wide stripes of black

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and white. On the curving settees of the latest 150-foot megayacht you've got a touch of class. In the main saloon of your 30-foot sloop it looks like Folsom Prison. Wide stripes or bold patterns would be too much for such a confined space, where solid colors work well with fine stripes or tight patterns, and help to hide stains. The proper spacing of the stripe or pattern is determined by the size of the boat.

Color

Likewise, a little bit of color goes a long way. In a small space, it is said, color reflects back on itself. This sounded a little abstract until I thought of the sea of green that is now my main saloon. Bright colors can be overwhelming and take the place over. When choosing colors, opposites—red and green, or blue with yellow and orange—work together. In most cases, your chosen colors will need to dance with wood. Different woods have different tints, but in general, wood has



White gelcoat takes bolder patterns

a red or gold hue. Red and gold are opposites of green, so green is a popular interior color for boats (though not my green).

Sample first

All the principles of proportion, scale, color, and pattern choices can be distilled into one safe bet: Go with a neutral color (beige, cream,

or gold) for your primary fabric, ideally in a tight pattern or stripe. Use throw pillows and other accents to add a splash of color. This seems to be the low-risk decorating strategy used by many builders on new boats and on boats redecorated for resale. If it doesn't work out to your taste, pillows are cheap to replace and the neutral fabric stays.

The cockpit is often a different story. On most fiberglass boats you're dealing with much less wood in the cockpit and lots of gelcoat, which is usually white. Everything goes with white, so the cockpit might be the place to try a bold stripe, color, or pattern.

There's only one way to make sure a fabric, or a combination of fabrics, is going to look good on your boat, and that is to test

it out. Don't make the mistake I did and rely on a swatch to decide. Get a big sample of the fabric in question, wrap your cushions, and see it in place. It's worth it, even if you have to buy several yards of test fabric that you don't end up using.

Fabrics

When it comes to fabrics on today's boats, it's a Sunbrella world. Sunbrella is a trademark of Glen Raven Mills, but fabrics of this type, called solution-dyed acrylics, are made by a number of companies. Solution-dyed means that the dye is mixed into a molten liquid that is turned into fibers, then spun into yarn, then woven into the fabric. These fabrics are bulletproof and machine-washable. Initially there were only eight solid colors of rough sail-cover cloth to choose from, but today there are thousands of solution-dyed acrylics in every conceivable color, stripe, pattern, feel, and weight. It is even made in chenille, a soft

and fuzzy-feeling fabric.

There are a few caveats with solution-dyed acrylics. First, the fabrics with a printed design aren't as durable as the woven ones—the design will fade more quickly than the underlying fabric. Also, solution-dyed acrylics will shrink some over time.

Another popular fabric for boat interiors is Ultrasuede, a synthetic suede made by Toray. Ultrasuede is durable, fade resistant, cleanable, and machine-washable. Good old leather breathes well and is naturally mildew-resistant, but is by far the most expensive interior covering.

Mesh, the vinyl-covered polyester that is often used for patio furniture, can be used for the tops of cockpit cushions; the undersides are usually covered with another fabric. Mesh is also used to cover windows to cut down the sunlight while allowing you to see out. It lasts forever—usually much longer than the stitching that holds it together.



Use neutrals for the interior

Window coverings

Selecting and installing window coverings (drapes and blinds) for a boat can be frustrating. On many boats the walls are slanted, and it's hard to build around all those bulging knobs and hinges on most portlights. If your boat has relatively vertical portlights, a simple track with a hanging curtain can

do the job well. For slanting surfaces, drapes or blinds must have tracks on the top and bottom and sometimes a retaining wire along the sides as well. You can get an off-the-shelf track-and-carrier combination if you're lucky enough to find one that fits. Curtains should be backed with a lining, which blocks out light and acts as a sacrificial surface for sun damage.

Carpet

Some see carpet on a sailboat as unseamanlike, but it can look great, feels great on bare feet, and can be a quick-and-easy fix if your cabin sole isn't what it used to be. Remember that carpeting a boat will add a large percentage of a new element, so figure this into your golden mean. Solution-dyed nylon or olefin carpets are recommended; good old wool is durable and naturally flame-retardant, but it shrinks and should be tacked in place. Carpet should be cut in segments that can be easily removed for wash-

ing and drying. Make templates out of heavy paper, then flip the template and trace it onto the back side of the carpet before cutting.

The edges of carpets should be bound to prevent fraying. Stitched binding is preferred, but can cost over a dollar per foot. My quick-and-dirty trick is to melt the edges of synthetic carpet with an old iron (this may ruin the iron). Angle the iron to make a slight bevel toward the top of the carpet. Definitely practice on a scrap piece first, because you won't know exactly how it will melt, drip, or perhaps burst into flames unless you try it out first.

Go with the pros

The whole world, from your office chair to your car's interior, seems to be covered in some kind of fabric but each kind of upholstery is a specialty. Quality marine upholsterers know what they are doing and deserve the money you pay them. They use

special foams (an article could be written on foam alone) and UV-resistant thread and know how to sew things so they will survive in the marine environment. Resist the temptation to save money by using a non-marine upholsterer; you will most likely find your cushions literally falling apart at the seams after a year. Likewise, the advice of a good interior designer is money well spent, considering that you will have to live with the results for years to come or start all over.

Many sailors spend untold hours varnishing, painting, and polishing their boats while living with old fabrics, window coverings, and floors that detract from their boat's overall appearance. An interior revamp can transform the whole look and feel of your boat and cost less than you'd spend on a single new sail. ♣

Clark Beek is currently cruising in the Indian Ocean.