

CREATING AN ONBOARD OFFICE



by Jo Webnar

When my husband and I bought the *Jolly Mon*, a 36' Nova Sundeck Trawler, we knew we would have her customized. Our plans were to live aboard and work from the boat, and that required an office. Since neither of us are talented with tools and finishing work, we needed professional help.

Fortunately for us, we knew and trusted Larsen's boatyard in Waukegan, Illinois, and had dealt with them for over 20 years. I remember the first day I spoke to the carpenter about the changes I wanted to make to our boat. I told him that I wanted an office instead of a forward stateroom; he admitted it

would be an "interesting challenge," but they were willing to work with us. The professionals at Larsen's helped design the concept and made it work. By the time we were done, I not only had a working office, but it turned out to be a

beautiful asset that has paid for itself many times over.

When the carpenter was ready to build the desk and cabinets, John and I made cardboard boxes the size of the telephone, fax/printer/scanner, monitor, keyboard, docking station and laptop. This helped him visualize the equipment we would need and where we wanted it placed. He still wasn't convinced there was enough room for everything, and we had to make some hard decisions. To create more visual space, the first thing to go was the beautiful teak door to the stateroom. The carpenter suggested we store it, but since we were going to be liveaboards, that wasn't an option. We ended up do-

nating it to the yard's carpentry shop. Other problems arose; for example, the office chair had to be built inside the small space because it would not fit through the door.

The next problem was figuring out what type of lighting and communication the office would require. For lighting, we used track overhead fixtures and indirect lighting over and inside the built-in cabinets. The three 12-volt fixtures provide light without running the genset or being tied to 110. There are enough hidden outlets to run the fax/printer/scanner, monitor, keyboard, docking station and an assortment of laptop add-ons. We also installed communication wiring, outlets and through-hull fittings for three shore phone lines, and cable service for high-speed data. It is worth noting that you need power conditioning with a ground source to avoid spikes that will ruin your office equipment. Ours was provided free by a close friend.

Before we moved to the boat, I was working out of my home as an international project manager for AT&T. As soon as the remodeling was finished, I provided my senior management with pictures of the completed office to prove that it was really practical. The hardest part was convincing the bureaucracy of a large corporation that I worked out of an office on a boat located in a harbor, and needed two telephones and a high-speed data line installed for corporate use. I almost went bald pulling my hair out trying to explain that this was a real office, albeit one on a boat. Even the telephone company had problems with the concept of an office afloat and the lines and telephone numbers it required. Most slips had facilities for one land line, but more than that seemed to cause problems. Luckily, the harbor authorities and local telephone company were willing to work with me. Once I got permission to use the wire facilities from the surrounding slips, I had enough lines for my residence, business and fax, and I was in business.



Customizing Jolly Mon not only created a convenient work space for owners Jo and John Webnar, it also gave dogs Tisha and Trevor their own entrance.

Yes, there is something really decadent about going to work in a swimsuit only 20 feet from my berth. I soon found I needed a remote control to mute the Jimmy Buffet CD when the phone rings. The sound of the waves beating on the hull during bad weather was the only real drawback. My clients could hear them during conference calls. Several times I was asked about the noise, and when I explained, they thought I was kidding, particularly clients in Germany and England. I can't begin to tell you how many coworkers were envious. Since I have retired, I still use the office on a daily basis to write and use the computer. Occasionally, I even let my husband use it.

Customizing our boat didn't stop with the office. One of the things we did was to put in a doggie door. I think our carpenter is still having nightmares and cold sweats over that, but our two Portuguese Water Dogs love it and use it at least 100 times a day.

While there is no such thing as the "perfect boat," you can come close by changing it to fit your lifestyle. I belong to an organization of women boaters, and at one of our meetings we had a lively discussion about our boats and how we have personalized them. One new member was complaining about the aft-cabin layout on her boat. Everyone had a suggestion and gave her a great deal of encouragement for remodeling. One woman even offered to come and help with her Sawzall (a large power saw used to cut through walls). If you have enough money, patience and imagination, anything can be changed — tanks can be moved, berths relocated, cabinets built, closets enlarged. Updating heads, countertops, and layout can only improve the value of your boat. (Caveat: To avoid compromising structural integrity, you should consult a marine architect before major remodeling.)

When we bought the *Jolly Mon*, our broker had looked at us in horror when we told him we were going to rip out the forward stateroom and have an office built. According to him, this would lower our resale value. I believe that just the opposite is true. Instead of decreasing the value of our boat, people have been amazed at what we accomplished with so little space, and some have asked about purchasing the boat because of the office. Our surveyor even took pictures so that he could duplicate it on his own boat. There is always the possibility, of course, that you may limit your resale market; however, the years of pleasure and use you derive from such modifications will more than make up for the extra trouble finding the right buyer. I think you'll find that what works for you will be appreciated by someone else, too.

After 25 years of sailing on Lake Michigan, John and Jo (and Tisha & Trevor) Webnar brought the *Jolly Mon* down the river system and the ICW to the Gulf of Mexico. They are currently living aboard at the Twin Dolphin Marina in Bradenton, Florida.