

GIVE A BOAT A

Choosing the right boat lift could mean more time on the water.

BY MATT GURNSEY

# LIFT



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**ould you like to spend more time on your boat?** Who wouldn't? But how?

Today's boat docks and lifts can be the path to that scenario for many owners, making their boat easier to use and care for, reducing maintenance costs and maintaining the value of a rather sizable investment. Instant access to the water is possible without constantly replacing expensive bottom paint. Twenty-four-hour access means never having to call ahead or wait for launching on a busy weekend.

Owners with boat lifts enjoy having their boat ready to go anytime they want. They use their boat more, because a nice evening can be spent on the boat without hooking up and heading for the launch ramp. Want to get some time on the skis

before sunset? Within minutes you can be on the water, if your boat is kept on a lift.

Keeping the boat out of the water prevents bottom fouling, which reduces performance and increases fuel use. Expensive bottom paint isn't needed, thereby maintaining the boat's factory finish. Easy washing of the hull and dry storage prevents discoloration. Outdrive components are better protected, and the chance for corrosion damage is eliminated.

Is a boat lift the right answer for your boating lifestyle? Read on to find out.



## feature boat lifts

### DOCK-STYLE LIFTS

**Dock-style lifts allow owners to drive their boat onto the floating structure.**

**T**raditionally popular for lightweight PWCs and small runabouts, lifts with newer designs can support larger boats. An area of the dock is set up with rollers to allow the boat to be driven onto the dock. Once in place, the boat may need to be winched up the final short distance to be clear of the water. You can then raise the outdrive to keep it out of the water.

Hybrid versions use water to partially submerge the stern section of the dock

for landing. Once the boat is in place, the water is pumped out, usually with air pumps, and the aft section comes out of the water. To launch a larger boat, the winch may be used to move the boat back toward the water until the stern settles deep enough for the engine to be started. The hybrid models eliminate this issue.

This style of lift floats in the water and is attached to the dock it sits next to. Areas where the water under the boat is excessively deep or



the ground is uneven are well suited to this design. Since it floats on the water, it is unaffected by tides or seasonal water-level variances. This style can also be wider than the boat, giving an owner the ability to walk around the boat.

The floats are constructed of composite materials that are shipped as modules, and they are easily assembled. They go together "like Legos," said Allan

Eva, owner of Cleveland-based Jet Dock ([jetdock.com](http://jetdock.com)). Some styles can be reconfigured with additional modules to accommodate a larger boat in the future, and the units are often owner installed, saving on labor costs.

Dock-style lifts allow the boat to be free of the water but do not add any additional hardware above the water to spoil the view from shore.



### VERTICAL-STYLE LIFTS

**The style that most people associate with the term boat lift, vertical lifts are often the lightest and easiest to install.**

**B**asic models feature cable-and-pulley operation, with a large wheel that the operator turns to raise or lower the boat, making it the slowest to launch and retrieve, with 50 or more turns of the wheel needed to move the boat into position.

Electrically operated vertical lifts, while an improvement, are still slower than hydraulic or air units, but their lower price is an advantage. The cables do wear out over time, meaning mainte-

nance costs will be higher. Commonly found in freshwater lakes in the Midwest, vertical-style lifts' light weight makes them easy to remove for winter storage.

The vertical lift's mechanism is above the boat to provide lift, so the mechanism is always in view, which may be less aesthetically pleasing, but given their simple design, these lifts can be the most economical, especially when they are manually powered.



## CANTILEVER-STYLE LIFTS

*Revolutionary when introduced, this style of lift has become the biggest seller in the marketplace.*

**M**odels that operate hydraulically are most common, for their durability and fast operation — boats can be launched in less than a minute. Cantilever models are available with travel of between 4 and 5 feet, allowing them to be used in areas with minor water-level variances.

The mechanism is underwater, leaving little evidence of the unit when the boat is stored. These units are often

remote controlled, so they can be operated from inside the boat. Simply drive onto the support bunks, push the button on the key fob and the unit lifts the boat out of the water.

Dockside power or a solar-charged power module is required to operate the system. Because the mechanism is underwater, construction materials need to be suited to the lift's environment. High-grade aluminum and stainless



Hewitt Cantilever Lift

steel, as well as well-built hydraulic rams, will add years to the life of the unit. You can also get cantilever

lifts that use cable and pulleys and that feature manual cranks, such as the one shown above.

## FLOATING-STYLE LIFTS



Sunstream Float Lift

*Manufacturers have developed different solutions for a floating lift system. While all of the designs use air-filled tanks, usually of polypropylene construction, the lifting mechanism is radically different from model to model.*

**S**ome of these designs require the unit to be attached to the dock, and mechanical fastenings have to be secured all the way around the slip. Such a setup may not be allowed in rented slips, and it

won't work in doublewide slips that house two boats. Other free-floating models can be tied to the dock with regular docklines or can even be anchored to a mooring buoy. The unit's width can be an issue in some applications, as slip width can be restrictive.

Floating lifts use two basic methods for lowering the boat. One design uses large air pumps to raise and lower flotation tanks by partially flooding them, allowing the boat to float free when the unit is fully submerged. The other design uses the flotation tanks to suspend the actual lift mechanism, which can be a variation of a vertical lift or cantilever design. Another design rotates the tanks to allow the boat to be lowered between them, using a metal framework for the structure of the unit and to support the boat.

## feature boat lifts

### → INSTALLATION OPTIONS

Choosing the right lift or dock — one that is permanent or portable — can increase your enjoyment of your boat, reduce maintenance expenses and return a significant increase in value when the time comes to sell your boat.

If you own the property the lift will be on, a permanent installation may make the most sense, especially if it can be attached to an existing dock, pier or pilings. When pricing a permanent boat lift, be sure to take into account any permits for pilings or other structures that may be required. A permanent unit may require numerous permits with various governmental agencies, and the process can be time consuming and expensive.

Portable units are movable and often require no permits or additional installed structures. The initial cost may be higher, but in the end they may not cost more; indeed, they may be less expensive than the permanent version. Portable units can be completely freestanding, free floating or attached to a dock through either hardware or simple dock lines.

Floating units, when coupled with solar-charged power units, can be buoy-moored, allowing dry storage of the boat in areas where there is no dock but mooring is allowed.

### → SOLAR POWER OPTIONS

It is often easiest to use dockside electricity to run power-operated lifts. Many manufacturers offer solar-charged power stations that eliminate the need to have electricity on the dock. This can be helpful in areas where long piers are required to reach water deep enough for the boat, or to clear shallow-water vegetation. This is also the only way to power units that are buoy-moored.

Many units have the solar panel built right into the lid of the composite box that houses the batteries themselves, while others may use remote-mounted panels for installation in covered slips and boathouses.



### Construction Materials

We already know what water does to our boats — hence, our desire to keep them out of it when we're not using them. A boat lift will be in that same environment, so knowing the local conditions and selecting a properly constructed lift will determine how long it lasts.

Galvanized steel units can be less expensive, offer superior strength and have fewer issues with galvanic corrosion caused by electrolysis. Over time, they will show some surface rusting, and it is important that the components be built using a hot-dipped galvanizing process after all of the holes are drilled.

Aluminum is naturally resistant to corrosion, although it can suffer galvanic corrosion if it's not used properly. Stainless steel fasteners will eliminate most issues. Aluminum can also be lighter weight, saving money on shipping and making it easier to remove the lift in the winter if your lake freezes. You may have to use sacrificial anodes if the lift will be in salt water.

Hydraulic ram housings may be constructed of aluminum or steel, and the rams may be made of stainless steel. Better-quality rams cost more, and the more protection that's built into the unit, including boots or scrappers, the longer it will last. On hydraulic units, rams are moving the entire weight of the boat, so rams that become pitted or damaged will lose their effectiveness and could damage the boat. Bushings at pivot points will

reduce wear, further increasing lift life.

Wood bunks with a carpet covering are effective and economical, while composite or vinyl bunk covers are more expensive but will last longer and have less chance of causing wear on the boat hull. No matter their composition, bunks support the boat and should be properly spaced.

Floating docks are constructed of various plastic composites that should provide many years of use. Attachment components are often composite, as well, to prevent degradation of the metal fasteners. Many roller mechanisms use galvanized or stainless components, and most of the manufacturers use common roller components often seen as regular equipment on boat trailers. Owners should be able to find replacement parts locally.

Boat-lift owners — whether they have a manual lift, a cantilever-style lift or a hydraulic lift — use their boats more, spending more time on the water without the hassle of boat ramps and towing. They don't have to call ahead to have their boat launched from a dry-stack facility, and they don't worry about hours of operation. Is a boat lift the right choice for you? Ken Hey, CEO of Seattle-based Sunstream Boat Lifts ([sunstreamcorp.com](http://sunstreamcorp.com)), said it isn't really about storage.

"A boat lift should be a device to use your boat," he said, "not store it." We tend to agree. **BW**