



Upgrading Boat Upholstery

By [Capt. Bill Pike](#)

A Modest Makeover

Upgrading interior upholstery can make a big difference without costing a small fortune.

Like lots of other guys, I love my boat, meaning I want to lavish presents upon her and keep her in the best of all possible circumstances, forever. But of course, such sentiments pose a problem for a guy like me—money! Because I don't have stacks of it, I've been forced over the years to discover comparatively inexpensive ways to cherish and enhance the ol' girl without unduly disturbing my wife, otherwise known as "The Chancellor of the Exchequer."

One of my best and most recent finds entails simply hiring a talented but gentle-on-the-budget expert to renew *Betty Jane's* old interior upholstery or, more specifically, the cushions, pads, and bolsters that are used for sitting and/or sleeping onboard. I haven't actually pulled the trigger on the project yet, due to a temporary insufficiency of funds, but I have done lots of research, some of which has already found favor with The Chancellor. The gist of it all ensues:

To begin with, anyone looking to upgrade the upholstered seating and sleeping arrangements in a boat's interior should track down a marine professional well versed in the field, not a person who specializes in residential jobs. There are big differences between the two venues. "Just one example," says **Cheryl DiGennaro, Yacht Interior Specialist**, based in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, who has been sprucing up the marine scene for over 10 years now, "is thread."

Residential-type upholsterers, explains DiGennaro, tend to use residential-type thread that is easily damaged by both UV radiation (which ravages interior upholstery as well as exterior) and salt water. "I don't know how many people have come to me over the years with cushions done by residential professionals that are falling apart either because the thread's sun-rotted or it's been eaten up by salt water from people's wet bathing suits."

Once you've settled on a marine professional or professionals for your upgrade (and checked available references, by the way), the next step is to set up an

appointment so an upholsterer or upholsterers can visit your boat and take a look at her interior, snap a few photos, make precise measurements, and begin to envision a new look. This process is critical. While some businesses may suggest just bringing in your old cushions as templates for new, DiGennaro says this is a no-no. "Old cushions are going to be stretched and most likely compressed in places so they make extremely unreliable templates."

After the critical visit is complete it's time to pick out your fabric, an enterprise that usually entails a stint at a showroom, or, when dealing with smaller shops, at least the perusal of swatches and catalogs. Of course, there are thousands of patterns, textures, and types of fabric to choose from and a solid professional will guide you through the maze, often by asking questions. Do you use your boat a lot and sleep onboard? Is she subject to long periods of hermetically sealed inactivity, perhaps in direct sunlight? Will there be children onboard? Is there an annual haulout and wintertime storage? Do you want to simply refresh an old appearance or pretty much restyle it? And if the latter, by how much?

Marine fabrics can be broken down into three general groups. A basic, solid-color interior type from Sunbrella, for example, will cost about \$30 a square yard, according to DiGennaro. Ultraleather, which is generally smoother and plainer-looking (but about 30 times more durable than basic Sunbrella) will cost somewhere between \$80 and \$100 a square yard. And designer, solution-dyed acrylic, which resists saltwater/bathing suit damage with a vengeance and sports an incredible number of looks and textures (but is not nearly as durable as Ultraleather), can run anywhere from \$40 a square yard to well into the hundreds.



These new berths were created by Cheryl DiGennaro, a marine upholstery expert based in Portsmouth, Rhode Island.

Most of these rules enjoy a common currency among marine upholsterers, it seems, and they tend to be just about as specific as: Use softer foam on the backrests of settees, and denser, more compression-resistant stuff on seats. Go with layers in mattresses, with high-density material underneath (to prevent bottoming out) and medium- or light-density material (to produce a softer, more comfortable sleeping surface) on top. When snoozing, comfort, and longevity, as well as maximum resistance to mildew and mold, are important, opt for latex instead of polyurethane foam, although latex will cost approximately 30 percent more. And be wary of reticulated foam—while it lets moisture pass swiftly through unimpeded, thereby greatly reducing mold and mildew concerns, it tends to break down in intense sunlight, even when covered with some fabrics. And finally, remember that the foam in some cushions can be rehabbed via comparatively inexpensive steam treatments—just running a steamer over the exterior of a cushion will occasionally return it to its original shape, sometimes for years.

Of course, eventually, your upholsterer's going to finish up and hand you a bill. Both DiGennaro and Racine say the bottom line on interior marine upholstery jobs depends heavily on the kind of fabric selected. As with any job, using higher quality materials yields a higher bill.

In spite of the vagaries that fabric pricing interjects, however, I've got a rough-and-ready way to approximate the cost of an average project. You start by considering the estimates I've received for my 32-foot, one-stateroom-one-head Grand Banks beauty. DiGennaro and Racine agree that performing a modest makeover on *Betty* (complete with new fabric, foam, and styling) will cost between \$7,000 and \$11,000.

A nice spread? Well, it's certainly one you can use for extrapolational purposes. And then too, it's one that may not unduly disturb the Chancellor, I fervently hope.

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