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Seattle Boat Show reeling 'em in

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By Katherine Long

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From a \$200 plastic kayak to a \$7.2 million yacht, the range of options at the 64th annual Seattle Boat Show spanned the broad spectrum of vessels and the people who love them.

But it would be hard to find a more economical way to get out in the water than Dave Friant's cardboard boat, a do-it-yourself, kayak-like craft that costs about \$100 in materials to construct. Detailed plans are in Friant's book, "The Cardboard Boat Book" (\$15 at the boat show or on Amazon.com).

Friant's boat is one of about 1,000 featured at the show, which is the largest on the West Coast and third-largest in the United States. The show runs through Jan. 30.

After two years of sluggish boat sales nationwide and low attendance at the 10-day Seattle shows in 2009 and 2010, organizers and boat dealers alike said they're seeing an uptick in the number of people expressing interest in buying a boat.

Even Friant was attracting a small crowd around his little stand, which featured cardboard boats and models of how they are put together.

Friant, a senior manager at Microsoft, figured out how to build a stable boat from cardboard 29 years ago, when he was taking an engineering-physics class on fluid dynamics at Bellevue Community College (now Bellevue College). Later, he published a book with step-by-step directions. Friant has sold "thousands of books" — he's not sure quite how many — in 116 countries.

"This boat gives more smiles per dollar than any other boat in the show," he said. To demonstrate, he climbed into a cardboard boat he built 29 years ago and paddled it around a large wading pool set up

inside the Qwest Field Events Center.

"I get some funny looks from people in the arboretum, with their \$2,000 kayaks and me with my \$100 cardboard boat," Friant admitted.

For a bit more money, a customer could get out on the water with a molded plastic kayak (\$200, Comet or Spitfire models, LFS Marine & Outdoor of Bellingham) or an inflatable sailboat (\$500 for the Aquaglide Multisport 4.1 from North Sports, of White Salmon, Klickitat County).

But most people who want to go boating usually start with something like an 18-footer that can be towed behind a car (Bayliner 185, \$18,495 with trailer), said Kevin Roggenbuck, president of Lake Union Sea Ray & Bayliner.

Roggenbuck thinks the interest in boats this year reflects greater consumer confidence in the economy and a decision to stop being quite so frugal. "People are saying we want to go do something — we need to go travel, do some things, have some fun," he said. "I think everyone is thinking that way."

Alan and Laura Tacy, of Puyallup, and their two children, Leon and Warren, were browsing both boats and gear Sunday, including GPS and navigation equipment, space-saving tables, cup holders and inflatable platforms. More than half the people who go to the show are looking for accessories, said George Harris, president of the Northwest Marine Trade Association, which puts on the show.

The Tacys bought a 27-foot Bayliner two years ago and do a lot of boat camping in the summer, docking at Washington state parks and sleeping on their boat. Both extolled boating for being a surprisingly affordable way to spend time with their kids.

A few booths over, Steve Winner was getting ready to ink a deal on a 29-foot Ranger Tug, a \$230,000 tugboat-style boat made in Washington.

Ranger tugs (\$50,000 to \$250,000) are "a platform for adventure" because there's space to store kayaks and bikes, and the boats often have features like barbecues and shrimp-pot pullers, said Jeff Messmer, vice president of Ranger Tugs.

"This boat has all the amenities normally reserved for a larger boat — air conditioning, a heater, a generator," said Winner, who flew up from California and, at 61, is planning to retire in a year and travel in style.

Most boat shows feature a narrow slice of the boating market — all bass boats or all luxury yachts, for example, said spokeswoman Lisa Samuelson. The wide range of boats at the Seattle show reflects boating's popularity here, where 1 in every 10 Washington households owns a boat, and 68 percent of Washington residents go boating, she said.

The star of the Seattle show was the Sea Venture, a \$7.2 million, 100-foot yacht moored on South Lake Union. The custom-built yacht has four staterooms, nine bathrooms (or heads), seven showers, an open deck, a formal dining room, African mahogany cabinetry, marble countertops in the galley and bathroom, teak floors, three bars and a spiral staircase leading from the master suite to the sky lounge.

By the end of the day Sunday, it was still available.

"No, it hasn't sold yet," said Michael DiCondina, president of Hargrave Yacht Brokerage. "I wish."

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