

Cleaning & Detailing Your Boat

Marianne Scott learns the ropes from Seattle detailer and author Natalie Sears

By Marianne Scott
Photos by Marianne Scott and Natalie Sears

I had thought that the term “detailing” only applied to cars. Then I discovered a new book entitled, *The Insider’s Guide to Boat Cleaning and Detailing* (McGraw Hill, 2009) and learned that its author, Natalie Sears, practices her arts—and uses her elbow grease—in Seattle.

Reflecting on the topic, I realized that, of course, the whole concept of detailing is highly applicable to boats. Just think how much time we all spend to get mold and mildew off our decks, scour those bird droppings, tackle rust and stains, and fight the relentless corrosion of salt. We all want to make our yachts spotless, spiffy and sparkly.

And that’s just on the outside. I’m always amazed how quickly our boat’s interior gets filthy. Mold attacks the smallest crumb left behind. Even in the middle of the ocean, layers of dust settle quickly.

Where does it all come from? I guess between our shedding skin, hair, dust from bedding and clothing, and cooking in a few square feet, dirt gets concentrated. That’s where Natalie comes in.

After the Seattle Yacht Club’s recent “Out of this World” Opening Day ceremonies, I had the opportunity to meet her and learn why she’s subtitled her book “Professional Secrets to Make Your Sailboat or Powerboat Shine.”

A very youthful 38-year-old (she looks about 26), Natalie is actually a veteran of boat cleaning, having started her detailing business in 1990, just after graduating from high school. She said she came from an entrepreneurial family and starting a business of her own—at just 19—seemed perfectly natural. “I didn’t know anything about boats,” she said a bit ruefully. “But I saw a lot of them around town. So I went



Natalie Sears aboard *Beyond the Stars* assesses a stain to be removed.

to Fred Meyers, bought buckets and cleaning stuff and decided I was in business.”

She laughs a bit recalling her first venture. She’d already written and printed her brochures, consulted some cleaning guides and finally got up the courage to offer her detailing services to a few boat brokers. The first four she approached were very friendly but offered no work. The fifth, a curmudgeon named Herb, figured out quickly that this blond,

pony-tailed “girl” had zero experience actually cleaning a boat. He sent her down to a filthy 29-foot sailboat, encrusted with bird doo, mold and slime. “How much?” he challenged. Although she’d not developed a price list, Natalie thought quickly. One hundred she responded. Herb looked at her askance. Natalie departed, discouraged and feeling stupid.

But a few days later, Herb called. “I’ll pay you \$400 to clean that

Photo below - Natalie uses TE-KA cleaner and soft brush to restore teak decks to a golden color.





Natalie at her truck's trunk with her supplies.



Natalie Sears aboard Beyond the Stars peruses her book, "The Insider's Guide to Boat Cleaning and Detailing."

boat. That's a fair price. But if you don't satisfy me, you'll get nothing," Natalie took on the challenge. With her buckets and pink sponges, she degreased the boat and revarnished the brightwork.

Result? Herb, who turned out to have a soft heart and became her

mentor, made up 70 percent of her business over the following years. As she gained more experience, she learned the ways of making boats look their best and spent the next five years scrubbing, polishing and generally working her butt off.

She then took a break. "I'd been working solo and it was hard, physi-

cal work. So I went to Microsoft as a marketing manager." While there, she also earned a business degree at the University of Washington.

But in the long run, the office environment didn't suit her. "I realized I preferred being outdoors, and most of all, being my own boss," Natalie explained. "So in 2002, I went back to the boat detailing business, this time with a lot more knowledge."

Part of that knowledge was the importance of a web presence to promote her company and services (www.DeckhandDetailing.com). Her business took off. She now has

a staff of eight, and Natalie does less of the muscle work.

In the meantime, she began writing columns with cleaning tips for a regional marine magazine. One day, she looked at the list of topics she'd covered and realized a book was a possibility. She wrote a book proposal and presto! McGraw Hill commissioned it.

How to mess up your boat

One of the biggest problems, says Natalie, is that people forget about their yacht at the end of a cruise, or the end of the boating season. Boat-



Photo above - 3-M's 303 Aerospace Protectant is ideal for vinyl and rubber.

Photo below - Lysol Mildew Remover kills the mold on canvas.



An industrial-type buffer gets results without leaving swirl marks.

ers will have been out cruising, catching fish, crabbing, or just eating in the small space available. "They come home after completing their cruise and it seems they can't wait to get off. Maybe school or work is waiting but the boat drops out of their minds. They lock up and run." Her description of what comes next isn't pretty.

Food crumbs and any other debris left behind either rots or attracts mildew. Both leave stains and smells. Some mold stains aren't removable. Dust settles in. Salt left on all surfaces turn into small prisms that allow the sun to burn through wax, gelcoat and varnish. Condensation encourages those mold spores to bloom even further. Closed, unwashed fridges and iceboxes smell like something died in there. We won't even mention the head.

Natalie explains that when people finally return to their boat, getting it back to liveability and feeling happy to be aboard takes several times as long as if they do a cleanup after each voyage. If she were given to old sayings, she'd use the old "a stitch in time saves nine."

Her advice is, of course, highly commonsensical. Her first two rules for keeping your boat in shape are:

1. Choose the correct products for cleaning your boat, those that are designed for boats, not the kitchen and bath.

2. Once you know the basic clean-



Spot-Off and dish brush will remove rug stains.

ing products you need, clean the boat before it gets out of hand.

Finding the right products isn't easy. Natalie mimics the dazed look on a customer's face at West Marine. "They look and look at the rows of products available. Stain removers, waxes, boat soaps, rust busters, gelcoat restorers, teak oil—oodles of bottles line the shelves."

To make sure she uses the right stuff, Natalie always brings her own cleaning supplies and tools to any boat her company is cleaning and detailing. Except for the brushes to scrub non-slip decks, everything she

uses must be "soft." "If a product or tool feels good on your face," she says, "then it's perfect for the boat."

She only uses gentle microfibre cleaning cloths and she buys them by the bale. Terry cloth, all those old towels boaters tend to cut up and make into boat rags, are off limits. "Terry cloth is made up of those little loops," she explains. "Those loops collect dirt that can scratch your boat's strataglass and lexan. They also remove wax." If, however, you have scratched your dodger's "glass," or any other plastic or plexiglass windows, Natalie

recommends 3-M Finesse-it, which is designed to remove light scratches.

Here I must interject one of my own marvellous cleaning finds. Our house came with trendy-looking, black-granite kitchen countertops. Although attractive, black granite is a nightmare to keep clean. Not only does every crumb show, but even tiny drops leave water stains. Recently, a friend gave me a "rag" called E-cloth. It claims to clean and polish surfaces—even those with greasy finger marks or cooking oil—with only water. I was sceptical. But it's true.

Water from a spray bottle, a wipe and my countertops are clean and shiny. No need to polish to remove water streaks. Skip the paper towels. Great for your stainless stove on the boat. And for mirrors, and the fingerprints on your shiny boat varnish. The manufacturer claims the cloths are so good because they're made of millions of tiny fibers.

I have now obtained several more of these miracle E-cloths and keep them on the boat and in home bathrooms. No lint. And no harsh cleaners so they're environmentally friendly and easy on the hands. They wash like any other cleaning cloth (but don't use fabric softener which reduces the cloth's ability to pick up dirt) and are available in good kitchen stores in Washington and BC. Natalie says she's going to try them out.



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Stain removal

Removing stains can be a real chore. Here are some solutions to common problems.

For brown algae stains, use **Rust Remover** (Star Brite or West Marine) and scrub with a soft deck brush. Rinse thoroughly.

For bird droppings, especially during berry season, use a Mr. Clean Magic Eraser pad to get most of the stain out, then rub in cleaner/wax with a microfibre cloth.

For water spots, use **white vinegar** to remove any mineral residue.

For water stains (those black streaks below scuppers, for instance), also begin with vinegar. If the stains have soaked into the gelcoat you'll have to use a deep-cleaning wax to remove them.

For black and green mildew, use a mildew remover made by **Lysol** or **Tilex**. These are an exception to the "no kitchen supplies" rule, they're not biodegradable and are harsh enough to require the wearing of gloves. Natalie suggests you use a spray bottle, wet only a small portion of mold, and wipe away the mold and liquid with a cloth so that nothing gets in the water.

For your inflatable dinghy, use those same Mr. Clean Magic Eraser pad and wash with Simple Green. Wipe with pad. Mix Simple Green with water and use a soft brush to clean all the vinyl areas. Rinse thoroughly.

Waxing your boat

"Whether your boat is new or older, the easiest way to keep it clean is to wax it," says Natalie. "Remember that oxidation, combined with sunlight and salt, is your boat's greatest enemy." Once your boat is glossy, she continues, you can touch up areas where wax may have worn off. What's more, bird droppings, water and salt rinse off much more easily. Wax makes everything easier to maintain.

If you're a do it yourselfer, she advises you use a cleaner-wax combination and the product she likes is Meguiar's No. 50 Cleaner Wax. "It's non-abrasive," she says. "And it's a one-step formula that cleans and polishes at the same time. It takes away the oxidation (if you haven't waited too long) and you don't have to clean and then wax. You can do it by hand. Most people can't screw it up."

I've also used West Marine's color restorer on some severely oxidized gelcoat. It works well, but needs polish afterwards. There are further caveats to just using a cleaner wax if your boat is heavily oxidized. For step-by-step instructions for different levels of oxidation, look at chapter two in Natalie's book, and see the list of do's and don'ts on page 28.

Should you use a buffer? "Well," says Natalie, "those rotary buffers you buy at Wal-Mart don't really do

the job. They leave swirls and splotches." This is especially true for the large fiberglass expanses on powerboats. Since you must hold those buffers up above your head a good bit of the time, you don't get constant pressure and thus the results are uneven and leave swirls. Nor do the buffers rotate fast enough. The commercial buffers Natalie's crew use has a speed ranging from 1000-4000 rpm. (To see if your boat has swirl marks, use polarized sun glasses.)

That said, even commercial buffers are hard to use on sailboats. "You have too many nooks, cranies and curves. Shrouds, blocks, all kinds of boat attachments get in the way," says Natalie. "Buffers are useful for large expanses like hulls and a powerboat's superstructure.

Natalie includes a section on the protection of Awlgrip and other painted surfaces. If your boat is painted with one of these epoxy paints, read Chapter 2 for good advice on maintenance.

That Teak Deck

There are likely as many opinions on how to maintain teak decks as there are boat owners. One simple solution is to use salt water and a soft scrub brush (scrubbing against the grain) to remove dirt, then rinse with fresh water. This will leave the deck clean but gray. Another approach uses liquid gel Cascade dishwasher soap mixed with some water. Scrub lightly against the grain and rinse.

If you want golden teak, you'll

have to use either an acidic or non-acidic cleaner. Non-acidic usually comes in powder form. The acidic is usually a two-part solution (Natalie uses TE-KA scrubless cleaner and brightener).

Here are the steps for the two-part system.

1. Avoid direct sunlight. Wear rubber boots and old clothing. Put on rubber gloves and protective eyewear.

2. Be sure you clean your teak after waxing your boat, so residue runs off easily. Have rags ready to wipe of stainless or other items that may be splashed.

3. Use a long-handled soft brush and a soft handbrush. Open your bottles in advance.

4. Choose six-by-six-foot section and pour on part A. Spread the

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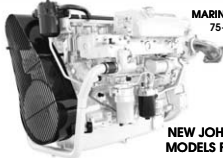
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To clean teak decks, Cascade gel dishwasher detergent mixed with water works well.

solution with the brush. Lightly scrub against the grain. Repeat for several sections. Rinse. Pour part B and spread it in six-by-six-foot sections. Let it sit 3-5 minutes. Rinse thoroughly and be sure to rinse all parts of the boat where runoff may have touched the surface.

Canvas, Carpet, Vinyl and Windows

In our region, it won't take long for canvas on covers and dodgers to attract mildew. So the best thing to

do is to clean the canvas while your cleaning the deck. Use the same brush and boat soap to kill that dirt and mold.

If it's too late and green or black mildew has taken hold, you'll have to take your canvas down, spread it on a dock and apply a mildew cleaner like Lysol Mildew Remover. Use your soft brush to spread the cleaner and let it soak. You may have to repeat it. Spray with fresh water and give a light dusting of the mildew remover on the canvas to prevent a future ecosystem from

taking hold.

Carpet cleaning resembles the treatment you give your rugs at home. Clean before the stain sets. Natalie gives a marvelous list of stain remover hints on page 104.

For vinyl cleaning, rubber rub rails, shore cords and fenders, use a combination of Mr. Clean Magic Eraser, mildew remover, a multi-purpose cleaner, microfiber cloths, and (one of my favorite protectants), 303 Aerospace Protectant. I use the last item to restore vinyl that has become sun bleached. Makes it look like new.

For windows, Natalie suggests a

spray like SprayWay glass cleaner and some microfiber cloths. After they're clean (you can use 3-M Finesse-it to remove light scratches), polish them with Star Brite Rain View, which sloughs off water and increases visibility.

Cleaning the Boat's Interior

Natalie advocates that you thoroughly clean your boat twice a year. And she means thoroughly. "If you leave damp cushions, dirt and mildew-attracting stuff aboard, you'll always catch that 'good ole boat smell' when you step aboard." Her

Natalie only uses microfiber cloths for cleaning. They don't scratch or streak.



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Mr. Clean Magic Eraser combined with Star-Brite's Black Streak Remover will kill water streaks.

Marianne Scott is an award-winning writer who has covered the marine scene for well over a dozen years. She has been contributing to *Northwest Yachting* since 2001. After sailing to French Polynesia and exploring the Baltic Sea, she is now finding the nooks and crannies of the BC coast. She is the author of *Naturally Salty*, *Coastal Characters of the Pacific Northwest* and of *Ocean Alexander—the first 25 years*.



I prefer more mature people, who are responsible, have a family to raise. They can set their own schedules and have flex time." Natalie does the books, marketing, quality control and overall supervision.

When not spiffifying boats, Natalie travels to Europe, which she says is her reward for her hard work. "I can visit Europe," she quips, "because I'm perfectly willing to clean toilets."

instructions even include using old toothbrushes.

Her chapter on interior cleaning (chapter 5) has a host of good suggestions for keeping things dry, stored properly, and of course, clean.

My own methods of keeping the interior clean are pretty simple. As I have a sailboat, and forego any carpeting, I combine a Sears's hand-held, battery-operated vacuum with a Swiffer to keep the floors clean (I usually object to those items for which I have to buy supplies over and over, but these devices are ideal for a boat). I use a wet mopping cloth also attached to the Swiffer to get the last bit of dust and mites. When we're aboard, I find I have to do this daily.

For dusting, I use those E-cloths I mentioned before. Spray water and wipe.

The rest is common sense. Clean the head and pump fresh water through it. A bit of mineral or even cooking oil will keep the flaps lubricated. Make sure the fridge is clean and dry. Leave the doors open. If you can, keep a light bulb or small heater on a timer in the winter to keep condensation and its moldy friends under control (but make sure any electrical cords you use are marine grade—no household extension cords).

Carpets and fabrics with dirt attached are mildew-philic. If food is stored on board, it must be in airtight containers.

Finding a Detailer

It's not surprising that Natalie includes a chapter on hiring a detailer. She revealed that 95 percent of her customers are power boaters. Sailboaters do it themselves, she explains.

Fees for waxing are \$28 per foot. Interior cleaning costs \$35 an hour. Your best bet is to get an estimate. She's hired a group of guys and gals to do the work. All are mature. "In my experience, young boys have the muscle but don't work as hard.



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