

"Jim the Boat Guy" Valiante and his wife Pam's marine repair business is a classic up by the bootstraps success story.



HAVE TOOLS, WILL TRAVEL

TIRED OF DEALING WITH BOATYARDS? IT'S TIME TO HIRE A MOBILE MARINE TECHNICIAN—BUT CHOOSING A GOOD ONE WILL TAKE DUE DILIGENCE.

BY MIKE SMITH

Even the best-built and best-maintained boats eventually need the services of a skilled marine technician—a mechanic, electrician or structural repair wizard. When this happens to you, you might be disappointed at the service offered by a local full-service boatyard, if you can even find one. Boatyards are getting scarce, thanks mostly to their replacement by more-profitable businesses or waterfront residences, so surviving yards—even those with limited or mediocre tech teams—are busier than ever. You'll often have to take a number and join

the queue, delivering your boat to the yard and then twiddling your thumbs until someone finally gets to work on your problem. Don't be surprised if you get bumped by a bigger job, one that the yard can bill a bundle for, while you hope they fix your boat before winter sets in.

It's enough to make some people take up golf.

Don't arrange a tee time yet. The decline of boatyards, and marinas with even limited repair services, has caused a corresponding uptick in the number of mobile marine technicians—men and women cast free from “regular job” employment who move from gig to gig, mod-

JIM VALIANTE

ern marine ronin without swords, but armed with complete sets of tools and eager to get your boat underway. A mobile marine technician, at least one who's reliable and competent, will come to your boat and fix it on the spot at an appointed day and time—usually for less money than the yard charges, and almost certainly with less aggravation. Today's mobile marine technician isn't just a guy, or maybe a woman, with a greasy tool box in the back of a pickup; the best roving techs work from fully equipped shops on wheels, carry a complete inventory of replacement parts, fluids, filters and so forth, and have the skills to provide the same service as the yard crew. The best of them also have a brick-and-mortar shop where they can perform bigger jobs, such as engine rebuilds and fiberglass repairs.

Sounds great—so what's the catch? Finding a good mobile marine tech could be more difficult than you think: There are a lot out there—Googling “mobile marine mechanics near [location of your boat]” will reveal a raft of them, almost all claiming to be God's gift

to wrenches. Are they all worth hiring? Well, the American Boat & Yacht Council does have a certification program and you can find a certified mechanic on their website. But like many professions in the marine industry, technicians generally require no licenses, so anybody can claim to be one, even if he can't tell a box wrench from a grease nipple. But there's plenty of wheat among the chaff—highly qualified mechanics not necessarily on that ABYC list—and if you do your due diligence you'll find them.

LET JIM DO IT

Ideally, we'd all have friends with boats similar to our own who can recommend a great mechanic or two based on personal experience, or warn us away from charlatans. If that's not the case, today we can call on our “friends” on social media: When I decided to find a mobile mechanic to repair an imaginary boat (based on Editor Dan Harding's twin-gas-powered Bertram 28) in the Essex, Connecticut,

LOOK FOR CREDENTIALS

Many people looking to hire a professional feel more confident if that person has some kind of certification attesting to his/her expertise. Not many self-employed marine mechanics have a diploma from an engine manufacturer's service course—generally, entrance to a training program is limited to employees of dealers, authorized service facilities and so forth.

There are exceptions: The Chapman School of Seamanship, in conjunction with Yamaha Marine University, offers a 9-week Yamaha Marine Maintenance Certification Program for mechanics wanting to specialize in outboard engines. Marine Mechanics Institute, Orlando, FL, has a 51-week Marine Technician Specialist training program including manufacturer-specific courses for Honda, Mercury, Suzuki, Volvo-Penta and Yamaha. An extra nine weeks adds diesel training. There may be others, too.

But there is one organization that provides faster, more affordable certification to self-employed as well as salaried technicians: The American Boat & Yacht Council offers professional certification in nine areas of marine technology, including diesel and gasoline engines, refrigeration, composites, electrical and corrosion. Candidates for certification take an ABYC course, in person or online, or through self-study, followed by a proctored exam. Passing the exam earns an Advisor Certification or, if accompanied by proof of at least two years of appropriate work experience approved by ABYC, Technician Certification. If you're looking to hire a marine tech based on credentials, that's the one you want to look for—it shows that the certificate holder has not only theoretical knowledge, but also hands-on experience in the area of his/her certification. (Some people think two years isn't enough time to create a master technician, but at least it's a start.)

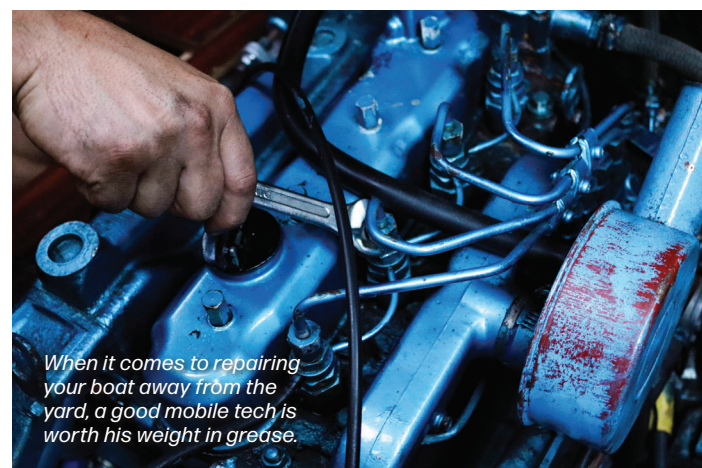
Certifications last for five years. Re-certification requires the candidate to have earned at least 10 Continuing Education Units in a related field (courses are given by ABYC), and to pass a re-certification exam.

The ABYC website, abycinc.org, has the search function to find Certified Technicians in your area. From the home page, click on Recreational Boaters in the box upper right, and the Find a Certified Technician option will be obvious, under the ABYC logo. You can also look for a marine surveyor from the same page.

Note too: Some marinas that also offer service facilities and haulouts might take issue with having mechanics onsite they're not affiliated with. In some cases too, they may charge you more for dry storage if you have someone besides one of their mechanics work on your boat—even charging you more for storage if you do your own wrenching when hauled out on their valuable real estate. Inquire accordingly.

area, home of the *Power and Motoryacht* editorial office, my first step was to consult the messages on the "Boaters of Long Island Sound" Facebook group. It's got the usual nonsense on it, like all these groups do, but also some intelligent comments from skilled boaters, including recommendations for local marine technicians.

After Googling-up many names, reading their websites (no website, or one last updated years ago, meant removal from contention), poring over reviews, and placing too many unanswered phone calls, I decided to email "Jim the Boat Guy". He has more than 125 reviews online—most mobile techs I found had only a handful of reviews, some of them frighteningly poor, while Jim's were mostly five-star. He's located in South Windsor, CT, just outside of Hartford; the *PMY* office is smack in the middle of his service area of "most of Connecticut and western and central Massachusetts," according to his website. Jim answered my email in a couple of hours, from the airport in Vancouver; he was on his way home from a vacation in Alaska. "I answer every phone call and email," he told me when we spoke on the phone the following day. "There is a tremendous amount of work to be had, and getting the best work means returning calls and messages even for work we don't want to do."



When it comes to repairing your boat away from the yard, a good mobile tech is worth his weight in grease.

"Jim the Boat Guy" is Jim Valiante, a marine technician who was pushed out of his job at a mom-and-pop boatyard by Covid-19, after 18 years of "learning to do everything. I had to do it all, and do it right," he said. Valiante had already been shrink-wrapping boats as a side gig (during this investigation, I discovered a large number of freelance shrink-wrappers working all over the country) and decided to take the leap and start his own business. His subsequent success shows he made the right decision.

Valiante bought a used ambulance and reconfigured it to be his shop on wheels, enlisted his wife, Pam, as a sidekick, and placed ads online. They started out simply, doing mostly shrink-wrapping. He still has the ambulance, now equipped with computers, a workbench and "all the tools in the world; I couldn't live without it. Ninety percent of the time I can do the whole job from the truck." Valiante specializes in repairing gasoline inboards and stern-drives—no diesels and few outboard repairs other than winterizing. "I stay in my lane," he said, and his business has grown enough that he turns down a lot of work. He now has a full-time employee who's

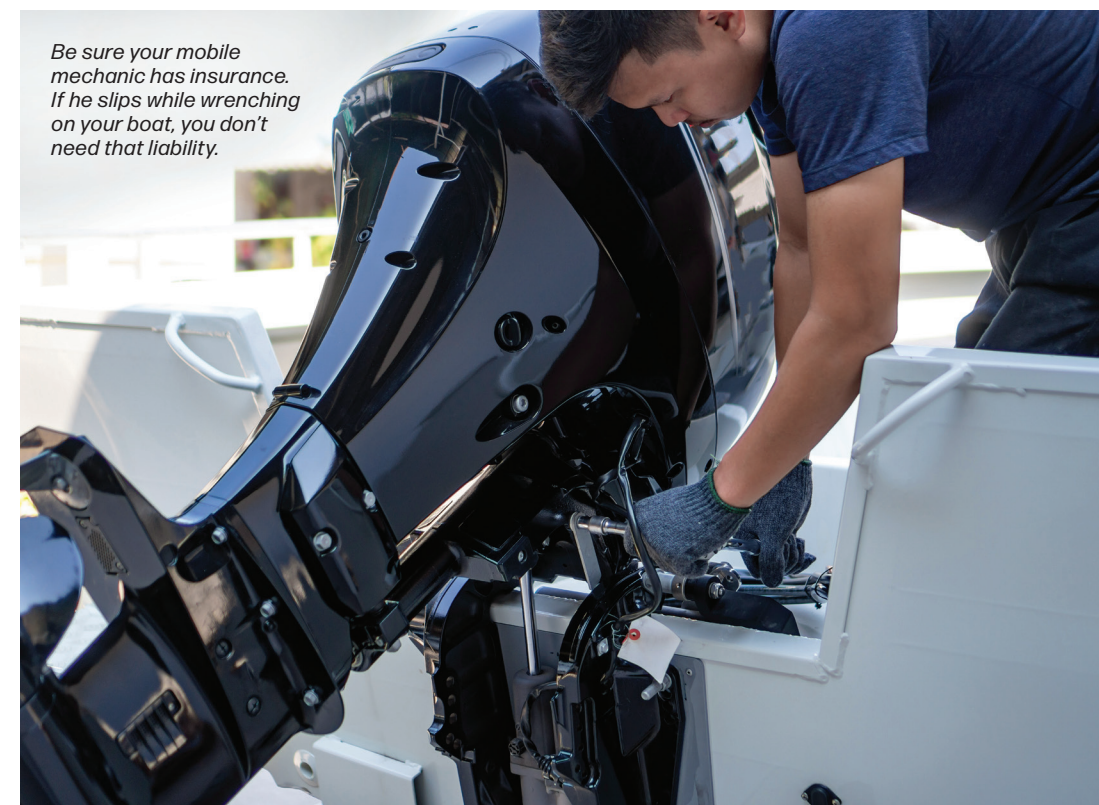
also a skilled mechanic and hires a couple more workers during busy times. "I could use two more techs, but there are not enough skilled people I would trust with my name," he says. Jim the Boat Guy's engine work is 50/50 mechanical/electronic, so his technicians need traditional experience and know-how, along with computer-diagnostic expertise. And more techs would mean Valiante spending less time on the road working out of his mobile shop, which is where he likes to be.

Still, Jim the Boat Guy isn't totally mobile: Valiante has built a 30 x 40-foot building, heated and air-conditioned, where he assembles the 25 to 30 engines he replaces every year. He buys more remanufactured long-blocks from Jasper Engines and Transmissions ("they come with a three-year warranty") than anyone else in New England, he said. When I spoke with him in mid-September, he had just taken delivery of a Ford F-350 fitted with a 4,000-lb. auto crane with a 22-foot hydraulic boom for removing engines from boats too big to move into his shop, a job that he has been sub-contracting to boatyards until now.

In another new building, Pam Valiante runs Jim the Boat Guy's canvas shop, where she builds and repairs mooring covers, Bimini tops, enclosures and so forth: "There are always 50, 75, maybe 100 customers who need canvas repairs," said Valiante. Together the Valiantes are launching an e-commerce store with 50,000 items, "making us a one-stop-shop for all marine service and boating needs." And yes, they still do lots of shrink-wrapping when the New England autumn sets in. Make your reservation early—they are very busy.

FIND YOUR BOAT GUY

Chances are you're beyond Jim Valiante's service area, so you'll have to find your own top-notch mobile marine technician. Besides the basics—ABYC, Googling, reading reviews, etc.—he had some tips to increase your chances of success. Most are common sense, the precautions you'd take when hiring any professional. But, Valiante told me, sometimes folks lose track when it comes to boats, especially if it's their first one. He's had a lot of work from people who bought a boat during the pandemic, took the word of the seller as to its condition, and didn't have it checked out. The result? You guessed it: Lots of engine repairs and repowerings. In a couple of cases, the buyer simply gave Valiante the boat rather than pay to have it made operational, or bought one of his own, fully functional, boats. "We build 10 or 12 engines a year for boats that



Be sure your mobile mechanic has insurance. If he slips while wrenching on your boat, you don't need that liability.

were sold with bad motors," he said. "Never buy a boat without a prepurchase inspection." (Follow this rule and you might not need a mechanic quite so soon.)

When it comes to hiring a mobile marine tech to repair your boat, "Look out for guys who take a long time to call back, or when they do you hear dogs barking in the background, etc." This is a serious business, one that demands long hours, often seven days a week, and a healthy commitment to mastering the trade, so avoid people who aren't taking it seriously. Deal with those pros who see this as a business and operate accordingly.

Be suspicious of techs who charge a lot less than everyone else for the same job. This is common with shrink-wrapping, said Valiante: Mobile wrappers charge less than boatyards, but are pretty close to each other. When one wrapper charges much less than others, investigate why. "People who go with the cheapest option often come to us the next year." You get what you pay for, and sometimes not even that.

Make sure any mobile marine technician you hire has insurance. Most marinas and boatyards—yes, some yards subcontract jobs to mobile techs—require outside workers to provide proof of insurance; demand that a tech coming to your home or a private slip to work on your boat do the same. You don't want to assume their liability. Basically, said Valiante, "Do your homework on who you're hiring."

So put the golf clubs away—it's safe to go boating again, once you've found a reliable mobile marine technician to keep things running smoothly. Just provide a place to park the truck. □