

## Take a field trip

Friday we had a blast. I had occasion to travel to Largo Fl. (just north from St, Pete.) to pick up some parts from a boat builder. As the builder in question was Intrepid Boats I decided to bring along my oldest son for a an education that even Tommy Barfield cant provide.

The trip was a 3 hour drive both ways and the homework that was done while driving didn't really add up to a day off school but I am satisfied the day was not wasted. I think a day off every once in while for a good reason is justified. That may be a field trip to a boat factory or a spring training game but fathers are entitled.

We were greeted by Joe Brenna, customer service rep for Intrepid and what followed was a little unexpected. I am quite familiar with Intrepid boats and their reputation for good customer service but what I actually expected was along the lines of "Well thanks for coming, here are your parts, there is the factory where we build boats yada yada" maybe a glance through the doors and back out the fence to the parking lot. I have toured many builders before and aside from the small custom shops, that is pretty much what you get. Not so here. Lets be clear about one thing. I don't own an Intrepid boat and they know it. However the head of customer service took two hours out of a Friday morning to give me the best factory tour of my career. I may have been spoiled, was perhaps my objectivity compromised by such attention? No Way. I know boats and knowing boats is what I do. Impressed? You bet and for good reason. Today's market is value based, buyers are looking for a good product at a good price and they expect to get some customer service long after the salesman has spent his commission check. These (Intrepid) boats are sold factory direct and have little to no dealer network, however they have an international reputation for quality, solid re-sale and constant demand. Why? Maybe because I was treated like the oil prince from Bahrain whose new 47 footer was just being finished and sea trialed not just some shmo surveyor working for somebody else who owns an Intrepid.

Joe made quick and fast friends with Cameron and I tagged along behind as we entered the first stage of the facility. This was a large area devoted to the electrical rigging. Two men occupied the space pre-assembling the dash panels, electrical panels and battery systems for the builds currently under production. They pre-wire from the panel outward so all wires end at the appliance and the bulk of the wiring at the panels is laid out in a neat symmetric pattern.

Joe pointed out that this stop was out of sync with the build process but we started there to avoid back tracking on our tour. The next stop was the fabric station. Joe explained that this is where it all begins, cloth comes arrives in rolls and liquid plastic comes on trucks in barrels and somehow complete boats go the far end of the building. At the cloth station Joe showed Cameron and I the computerized machine that cuts the glass cloth to the desired shapes and all the cubbyholes assigned to the specific boats being built at that time. The cloth is then stacked in order of laminating on a cart and delivered to the molds. Next was another neat machine called a four axis router that cuts pre made fiberglass / foam core sandwich panels into exact shapes to make bulkheads, partitions and other flat pieces. Passing through a door led us into a molding and laminating room that is dedicated to molding small parts like transom assemblies, consoles, seat bases, head enclosures, hard tops and other odd shaped fiberglass parts. Joe explained how

vacuum infusion is used on all of these parts to insure a uniform part of exact tolerance that fits where it belongs perfectly. Cameron was certainly impressed as he placed a finger in fresh white gel coat on a hard top mold being prepped for lamination. Joe took it in stride, wiped off the finger and continued his tour. Next we viewed the deck molds and deck assemblies being vacuum laminated then pre-rigged. Then came the big room. Hull molds, lots and lots of hull molds on tilting arbors. All being laid up by hand. The big ones use a core section to add stiffness and are vacuumed infused like the decks. We watched as the materials were being placed and wetted out, we watched the stringers and grid systems being installed and we saw the molds being cleaned and readied for the next boat in line. Then came the finishing barn. This is a very large and interesting building. The huge structure is divided into rows defined by the boats size and degree of customization. They come in one end empty shells and gradually move down the line until they emerge into the sunshine a gleaming brand new boat, completely rigged and ready. Every boat is then transported on huge trailers to the local municipal ramp, launched, sea trialed and tested. The performance numbers and all variables are recorded to that particular boat so as to aid the owner (or subsequent owners) in the future.

Wow! The time just flew by. It was lunchtime already so Cam and I bid Joe farewell, thanked him for a nice tour and began our journey home. After lunch Cameron looked at me and said "Dad, I really like our Cameron and Daddy days, I learned so much today I cant wait to tell my teacher"

So did I Cameron, So did I.

Many builders use the same care and quality as the one I mentioned. They can be found all over the country in Florida, the Carolinas, New Jersey, Michigan and Rhode Island to name just a few. Heck, Cabo Yachts is out West in a desert. They all make different styles to fit anyone's particular needs. What I suggest is that when you get serious about a new boat or even a new-to-you boat that you contact the factory. If they are close go visit them and take a tour. Place a call and see how hard it is to get a production manager on the phone to answer a build question. Quality and service is value.

If you missed the Naples boat show last weekend you sure missed out. It was the best yet at the new venue. The Miami show is coming in a few weeks. I want you all to go have a look, get your blood moving and just have fun.

Then take a field trip.