

FOR me, stepping onto the marina at Cape Town's relatively new Granger Bay was like yet another thread being woven into the tapestry of the picture of the ultimate in pleasure boating. Simply take a few steps from your luxury home, climb aboard your craft, turn the ignition key, slip two mooring ropes and you can be idling out into the waters of Table Bay.

For those ardent ski-boaters who have spent a lifetime manoeuvring craft over sand and into the surf before crashing through the waves to achieve the same end result — fishing on a boat at sea — walk-on moorings seems the ultimate dream.

However, over the last decade or two, I have experienced the true realities of having, using and maintaining a craft on moorings. This dream is substantially degraded by the realities of what goes into this method of storing one's craft. Or at least it *was*, until I saw a 30-odd foot craft cradled on air on an "AirBerth" in the Granger Bay Marina.

Is this the answer to a mariner's desire to enjoy all the benefits of having a craft on moorings without the drawbacks associated with on-water moorings?

Let's firstly look at these negatives that only manifest themselves once the excitement of owning such a craft has worn off. Maintenance, especially below water, is the primary problem. Anti-fouling and its costly ongoing application, corrosion on motors, constant checking of mooring ropes, water ingress via through-hull plumbing or from rain, and eventual gelcoat "osmosis" generally sums up the ongoing problems one will experience with moored craft.

Lifting the boat out of the water while she's still at her own moorings seemed like the out of the box thinking that just might overcome the majority of the problems mentioned above.

The idea was great, but how would it impact the simple "step aboard and go to sea" scenario? This was the main question on my mind when I first saw a big craft lying on her AirBerth. Sure, I had seen one of AirBerth's smallest models being demonstrated at the Durban Boat Show last year, but at the time only thought of it in relation to the small speed boat it was supporting, not a really big craft like the one I was now confronted with.

How practical would it be to get this big boat up and running? After all here was 8-10 tons of craft floating on air right out of the water.

In actual fact, it's unbelievably easy to get going and reverse the craft off the AirBerth. The few minutes it takes from the time the air is released from

BOATS THAT FLOAT ON AIR

A great solution to on-water mooring headaches





the two pontoons until the craft is floating is practically unnoticeable. In real terms the time from your arrival alongside the boat to backing off is largely insignificant. By the time the crew has got their cooler boxes, tackle, etc., on board, the craft is afloat and ready to depart.

As it's the AirBerth which is firmly tied to the moorings and not the craft, the craft is supported like a boat on a trailer. The boat's weight holds it in position on its supporting compression pads, and it is loosely tied with one or two ropes, more for one's own peace of mind reasons than to hold it in position.

The retrieval process takes a little longer as the portable electric blower box needs to be hooked up and the water displaced from the primary floats. On average it takes about 5-6 minutes to raise the craft out of the water. Firstly, one needs to drive one's craft onto the lowered AirBerth boat lift where the mooring guides will automatically guide your boat into the final berthed position. It's exactly like loading a boat onto a trailer on a slipway, but far easier, especially if there are side winds and/or currents to contend with.

I have watched the whole process and have thoroughly inspected the AirBerth, and after initially being rather

sceptical, I am now a total convert. I believe that the minor inconveniences I have noticed are easily outweighed by the benefits this docking system affords one's pride and joy — your boat.

The AirBerth supporting the big craft I saw in Granger Bay is now about eight years old. Despite this harsh environment where it is subjected to heavy sea growth and icy waters, and where it has to withstand the sea surges it protects the boat from, it still looks remarkably new.

Made in Australia, the AirBerth seems to have reached maturity. It is practical to use for craft from 4.4 metres (15ft) right up to 9.8m (46ft), weighs a maximum of 15 tons, and the manufacturers have perfected the materials used to ensure trouble-free longevity, even when used for professional and commercial operations.

I have briefly touched on some of the advantages one derives from having one's craft suspended right out of the water, and it is these and the cost savings associated with them that justify the initial costs of buying an AirBerth.

The primary cost when it comes to boat maintenance is anti-fouling which is not cheap and has to be done once or twice a year, depending on the amount of sea growth in the area in which you moor your craft. It also necessitates time out of the water and the hassles associated with this entire exercise. A clean unfouled hull provides a more efficient hull-over-water ride and more efficient fuel consumption.

Another big plus is having one's motors well clear of the water so that not even wind chop will reach them. Both the corrosion and sea growth are hugely minimised, and having the motors raised allows one to work on,



clean and flood them more thoroughly than one can do when the craft is moored.

With the boat out of the water, you can also inspect your hull and properly drain it, while the built-in hull spray jets on the AirBerth thoroughly clean the gelcoat with freshwater which greatly retards the onset of osmosis.

The only drawback I now see with regard to utilising the AirBerth docking system is purely a mindset issue, and maybe it's only my personal mindset. I like the look of an unobstructed craft moored alongside a dock where one just steps aboard. Okay, it's an image thing! To be fair, it's almost as easy to get aboard a suspended boat: one just has to climb aboard her to get onto the deck while she's on moorings.

The bottom line is that your craft — your baby — and her maintenance and well being are of the utmost importance, and cradling her on an AirBerth is undeniably the best you can do for her. Besides, keeping a craft in mint condition will add greatly to her value should you want to sell her.

To find out more about keeping your craft "floating on air", contact Derrick Levy at Boating World on 086 132 4754 or e-mail <info@boatingworld.co.za> 