

SKETCHBOOK

BY SAM DEVLIN

The Banjo 20: It's Playing Their Tune

A couple dropped by last week to look at one of the boats in my stable of previously loved (read: used) vessels. The pair live aboard a motorsailer on Lake Union — an enviable living arrangement — smack in the middle of thriving, cosmopolitan Seattle, just like Tom Hanks in the 1993 film *Sleepless in Seattle*.

The couple liked *Zelda Belle*, one of my Surf Scoter 26 designs, but didn't need a boat that large. Initially, I couldn't imagine why she wasn't perfect for their needs, but after thinking about their dream for another boat, I had a moment of clarity: Experienced boaters often want a boat to enjoy a specific experience.

Virtually everyone I know believes that work and life take more energy and time than ever. Finding even a few hours for leisurely outlets is increasingly difficult, and every boater wants to maximize those hours. That's why, in my eyes, the appealing and functional little *Zelda Belle* seemed to be a perfect prospect for the couple's consideration, but she didn't stir their hearts to action. They had specifics in mind that she couldn't achieve.

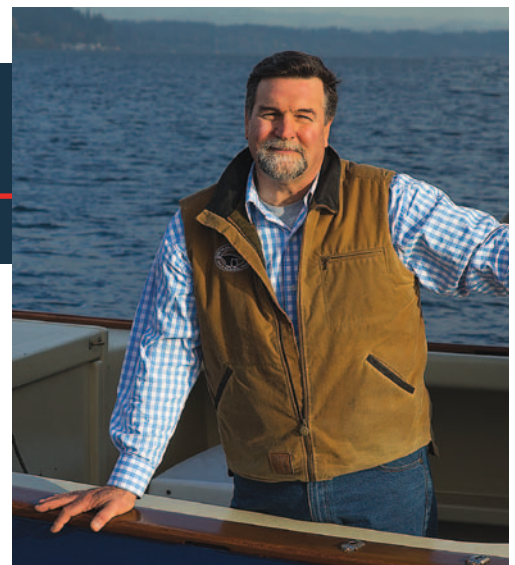
These were experienced boaters who own a sizable motorsailer as their primary boat. At first, that boat had seemed ideal — they could take her through a single lock from their moorage on the lake to the salt water of Puget Sound, British Columbia and Alaska — but over time, they had realized the flaws in their plan.

They couldn't go out whenever they wished, as there were a couple of bridges to pass through on the way to the locks, and at peak commuter times those bridges wouldn't open for any reason short of a national emergency. Then there was the act of locking, a fun and interesting way to spend an hour, if you think it's fun to be stressed out and feel your gut tightening. As you pull into the small basin of the lock, boats are all around you, with plenty of potential for screwing

up and damaging either your boat or your neighbor's. And then there are the lock tenders shouting barely audible directions and the tourists peering over the edge, scrutinizing your every move. For anyone who uses a boat to escape the stresses of a busy, active life, the mere thought of enduring this process yet again can result in spending a pleasant summer evening on the couch, rather than going boating.

The couple thus wanted to place their motorsailer some two hours north of her home — on salt water, with no locks to be transited and at a jumping-off spot near the San Juan Islands to the north. This would make the larger boat more convenient for cruising, but it also would leave a void in their boating lives: those short, enjoyable cruises on the lake. The lake cruising was really the catalyst for their search for another boat.

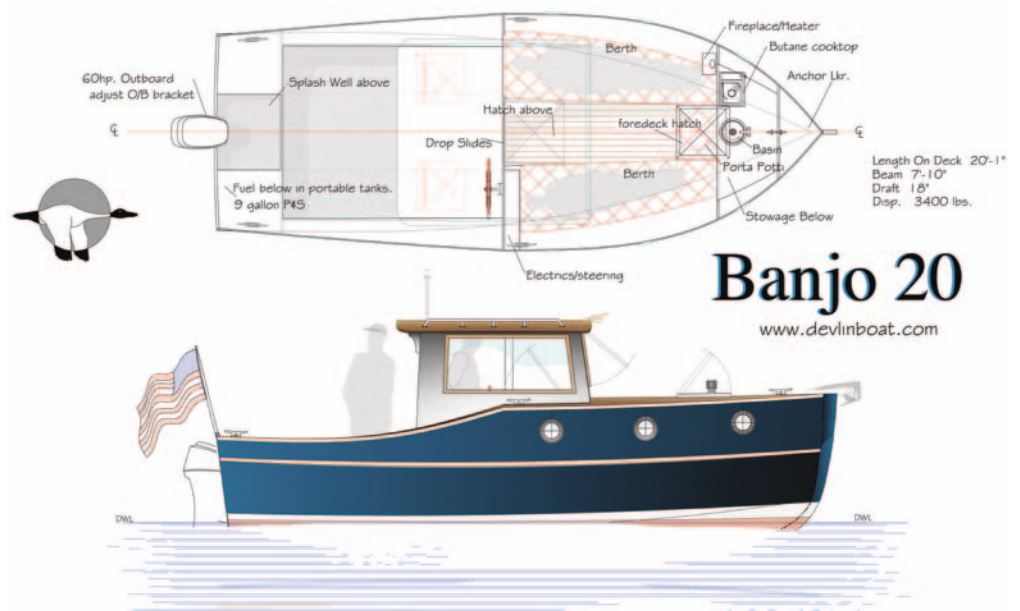
Zelda Belle was too big for them to fully embrace the idea of jumping into the boat with



a bottle of wine to enjoy the water and the view of Seattle for an hour or so. My Banjo 20 design, however, might fit the bill. This small but capable boat can get into or out of the moorage with little stress, and she can be used for anything from an evening cocktail cruise to occasional overnights. An outboard provides quiet and smooth power — a top end of 30 mph with a 115-hp engine or an economical 15- to 18-mph cruise with a 60. With modern outboards, the entire engine and mounting bracket are out of the water when locked in the tilted position, reducing maintenance.

The small pilothouse is not completely enclosed, but it does keep the captain and crew out of the elements. The top-hinged front window and side windows open to create a "porch" area at the steering station, with security and comfort. The cozy cabin is forward,

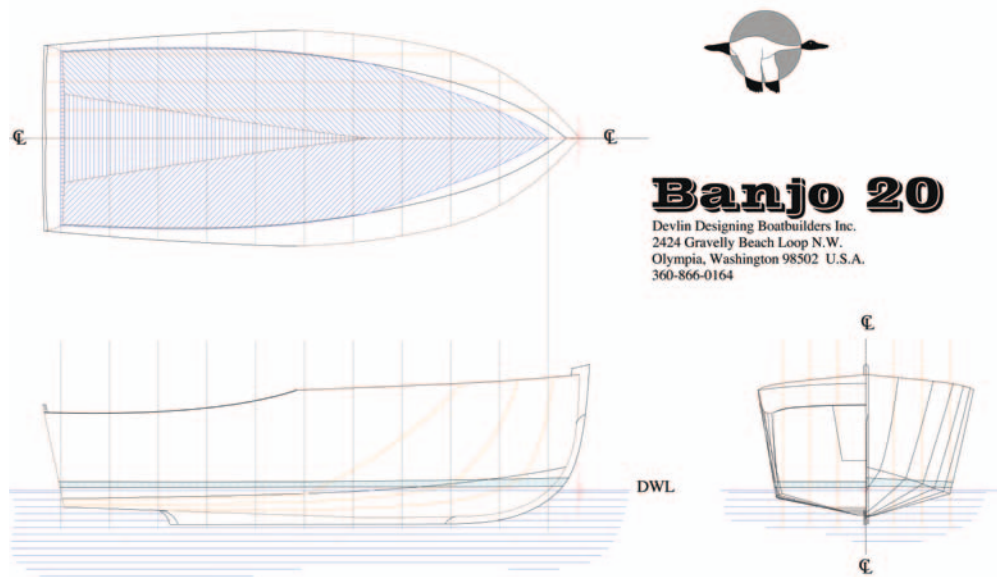
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with a small but functional galley up in the bow, a pair of berths to port and starboard, and a heater on the galley bulkhead forward. The “throne” rests in a place of honor, concealed by seating.

The Banjo 20 is functional, stable and safe in normal conditions — a lot of bang for the buck, if you ask me. I built myself a small launch a couple of years ago, similar to the Banjo 20 but without the accommodations. Though I like her and use her often, I sometimes wish I could throw the anchor over the side and lie down for a nap. Some of my friends call my launch a “grandpa boat,” and that’s not an inaccurate description, as one of my uses for her is to take my granddaughter out during summer visits.

I understand the desire to be on the water without the fuss of a larger boat. Of course, this couple could go even smaller, but I think the Banjo 20 is pretty close to the perfect “bridge” between a serious, large cruising boat and something that is small enough to enjoy on a whim. ■



Sam Devlin is a pioneer and popularizer of modern stitch-and-glue building methods. Devlin and his designs have been featured in many publications, and in 2012 he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement in Design award by WoodenBoat magazine. He is the author of Devlin’s Boatbuilding: How

to Build Any Boat the Stitch-and-Glue Way and has taught his methods at workshops around the country. There are currently 472 Devlin designs and hundreds of Devlin-built boats all over the world. His shop is in Olympia, Washington. devlindesigning.com