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Surf Scoter 26

A STOUT DEVLIN DESIGN

Story By ROBERT M. LANE

Sam Devlin believes his Surf Scoter 26 is a small boat that can safely cruise the 700-plus miles of the Inside Passage between Seattle and Southeast Alaska. It's no coincidence that the bird of the same name is considered one "stout sea duck" and is commonly found along the West Coast from Southern California to Alaska.

The boat line named Surf Scoter has been in Devlin's design books for years, but lately, with increased interest in cruising on smaller boats, he's begun pushing it toward production-line status with the recent launch of a 26 for a couple looking for an adventurous new way of living.

The male surf scoter ("scoter" is a general term for diving ducks) is glossy black and has a bulging, multicolored beak (white, black, orange, and red), with flashes of white on its neck and head. The female is a dowdy brown.

Devlin's newest Surf Scoter is pure Devlin: a boat with a look to the past in style and finish, but built with great

skill and innovative and modern techniques. The boat I visited recently—one Devlin hopes is the first of many—has a dark blue hull with brightly finished rub strakes and caprails, a sheer that dips beautifully about two-thirds of the way aft, and a classically styled low-rise cabin fitted with big windows and skylights. She has timeless bronze portlights, a varnished mast and lifting boom, and a bed larger than many I've seen on much bigger boats.

The interior also reflects Devlin's devotion to doing things the way they were back then: flawless white paint and richly finished mahogany trim, dark green leather upholstery, a teak-and-holly sole, and a folding Pullman sink (more on that later).

I boarded the Surf Scoter 26 in a marina on Budd Inlet in Olympia, Washington. Devlin's small boatyard and shop are on a cove in nearby Eld Inlet.

Several other Devlin boats were in the marina, including *Serendipity*, a 35-foot Czarina model he built in 1993. She would be our photo chase boat, courtesy of Pat Garboden, her owner, and Stet Palmer, who ran the boat that day.



Mike Baird/bairdphotos.com

Above: Devlin's newest design takes its name from the surf scoter, a robust West Coast sea duck.



Robert M. Lane



Robert M. Lane



Photos by Robert M. Lane



Cruising for two: the on-watch person has a great view. A backrest would make the seat that much more comfortable.

Also with us were George and Stepper LaBoutillier, an Ohio couple who bought the Surf Scoter 26 and named her *Zelda Belle* after an aunt Stepper never knew. While small-boat cruising is new to them (it's hard to pull up Ohio roots), they look on their wide-ranging cruising plans as an adventure and as an experiment in living. After chartering larger Devlin-built boats for three summers, they didn't hesitate to invest in the 26.

I've met people who have taken much smaller outboard-powered boats to Alaska. I know a woman who, with her husband, rowed a boat to Alaska. While some might argue whether something smaller than 26 feet is safe on that long voyage, the Surf Scoter looks suitable for the sometimes rough-and-tumble trip up the Inside Passage. And, it turns out, that's one of the places the LaBoutilliers plan to take *Zelda Belle*.

ANOTHER BUILDER

Legendary Yachts in Washougal, Washington, built *Zelda Belle* to the Devlin design. Legendary is noted for its construction of large classic wood sailboats.

Devlin joined forces with Stan Bishoprick, owner of Legendary, because the Devlin crew was building a 45-foot yacht and there was no space in his shop

for the 26 ordered by the LaBoutilliers. The buyers, who were eager to begin cruising, agreed to the use of Legendary's yard and came away praising the "incredible workmanship" of the crew in Washougal.

Devlin said such alliances between small yards are common, although more so on the East Coast. It's better to share work with a builder with equal commitment to quality than to build a bigger shop and hire more shipwrights for a single boat.

And, as we tested *Zelda Belle*, Legendary was at work on its second Surf Scoter 26.

Devlin is one of the industry's leaders in stitch-and-glue construction. His boats are wood (mostly plywood), but the extensive use of epoxy, resin, and fiberglass allows them to be described as "composite boats."

Devlin's design catalog is full of stitch-and-glue boats, from small sailboats, dinghies, and cartoppers to his fabled 45-foot Sockeye cruisers, three of which have been launched. Should you want to build a stitch-and-glue boat with your own hands, Devlin has both study and builder plans for sale.

The plywood pieces that compose the hull are stretched over bulkhead panels and temporarily stitched together with baling wire along the joints. The seams are

Left: Big windows, skylights, and portlights brighten the already cheerful atmosphere in the Surf Scoter's main cabin. Right: The berth in the bow is generous and well lighted. Breaker panels are on the right.

bonded with epoxy paste and layers of fiberglass tape. When the seams are cured, the hull is turned over, the wire removed, the holes filled, and the hull sheathed on all sides with fiberglass cloth and epoxy resin. The process produces a hull that's more like an airplane fuselage than a traditional stick-built wood boat.

"The basic argument for stitch-and-glue construction is that it uses fewer parts and that epoxy is used to bond and seal the parts to achieve a stronger monocoque," or one-piece boat, Devlin says. "The initial construction is quicker and easier and requires no building molds. And, in the long term, the boat is much easier to maintain."

Modifications are easy with a wood stitch-and-glue design: the Surf Scoter, which is similar in style to the Devlin Crown 32 and Black Crown 32, was designed as a 25-footer, but Devlin stretched it to 26 because Stepper wanted a little more foot room in the cockpit.

Devlin boats are built exclusively with British Standard 1088 marine plywood, which Devlin considers the best available on the world market. Two layers of ply, 12mm and 6mm, are used in the hull. For the nonmetric, that means the bottom of the boat is three-quarters of an inch thick.

The builder used 18mm marine plywood in the deckhouse. Awlcraft paint, an acrylic urethane version of Awlgrip, gives *Zelda Belle* such a smooth and glossy surface that many will guess she's a fiberglass boat.

Legendary also built a tender for *Zelda Belle*, a 9-foot-6-inch Devlin Polliwog, a stitch-and-glue boat that can be rowed or sailed. It will hang on transom brackets.

UNDER COVER

With one hand on the stainless-steel grab bar bolted to the deckhouse and one foot firmly on the wide caprail, it's an easy step down to the teak grating on *Zelda Belle*'s aft deck. There's room to move about, to the cabin entry or to the steering station on the starboard side, but not much more.

The box covering the engine occupies much of the cockpit, but the top is 73 inches wide and 43 inches deep, providing space to lounge or snooze on thick cushions. The owners chose to have the engine cover span the entire width of the cockpit. An alternative design would leave some open space on either side of the box. The layout on *Zelda Belle* creates convenient covered storage areas on each side of the engine for tools



Photos by Robert M. Lane

Left: The helm offers good visibility. The single monitor integrates all electronic systems, and the engine gauges are to the right of the wheel. Right: The owners asked for lot of storage, and they got it. The galley has four cabinets and a small refrigerator near the sink and range. Dishes are stowed in a niche that reaches under the side deck.

and deck gear. A dodger stretched across the lifting boom will provide shelter from mist and sun.

Tucked under the port deck in the cockpit is a handheld shower with hot and cold water taps. This is good, because the single head has no shower. When George and Stepper wish to shower, they'll do so on the aft deck.

The engine cover lifts easily on gas struts, and on the centerline below is an aluminum five-cylinder Volvo D3-160, a 2.4-liter diesel engine producing 163hp and driving a Volvo Duoprop through an outdrive contained in a composite enclosure. That's a small engine by today's standards. But it pushes a boat that will displace only about 6,000 lb. when fully loaded.

With common rail fuel injection and a variable geometry turbocharger promising efficiency, Devlin predicts that at 10 knots the Volvo's fuel burn will be about 2gph. At top speed, about 20 knots, fuel consumption will be about 5gph.

The engine room is neat and simple. There are fewer hoses than I'm accustomed to seeing, because sea water for engine cooling enters and leaves the boat through the outdrive.

There is no through-hull valve for the engine. In fact, there is not one on the boat. It's hard to imagine: a boat with no holes in the bottom. There are seacocks on the through-hull fittings for the two bilge pumps, but they are above the waterline.

Devlin specified marine-rated Racor fuel filters for the boat. The builders designed clever linkage on the fuel manifold that automatically switches fuel return when the supply valve is thrown to draw fuel from one tank or the other, preventing accidental overfilling of the tank not in use.

The Surf Scoter carries three sealed AGM Group 30 batteries below the sole near the helm. Two supply house power, and the third is for engine starting. The batteries lie on their sides below the deck, with the

master disconnect switch mounted on the face of the helm seat.

Under the starboard cockpit deck is space for a propane bottle, which is contained in a slatted box whose top folds out and down to the deck. This provides a platform for the person steering from the cockpit station. Devlin has a way of making a simple box look like fine furniture.

A watertight hatch under the central cockpit grating opens to reveal storage for seldom-needed items, including a spare propeller. This was my first glimpse of an amazing amount of storage on a small boat. "I told Sam, 'Let's get storage, lots of storage,'" George explains.

The teak slats on the deck are finished with Cetol, and they sparkle. Because this part of the deck offers the only access to the main cabin, there will be wear and tear and the need for refinishing the wood. The grate lifts out easily and can be taken to a shop for refinishing.

Powder-coated aluminum framed windows from Diamond/Sea-Glaze of British Columbia are used throughout the boat. Devlin also chose a tight-fitting aluminum-framed door from Diamond/Sea-Glaze.

Inside, the galley is to starboard, with a two-burner Princess propane stove and a microwave where one usually finds an oven. A Dickinson propane-burning heater is mounted on the aft bulkhead above the galley counter. The Norcold refrigerator is petite; George and Stepper will need to find space for a supplemental ice chest for storing large items and beverages, even if they plan to stop often to shop for perishables.

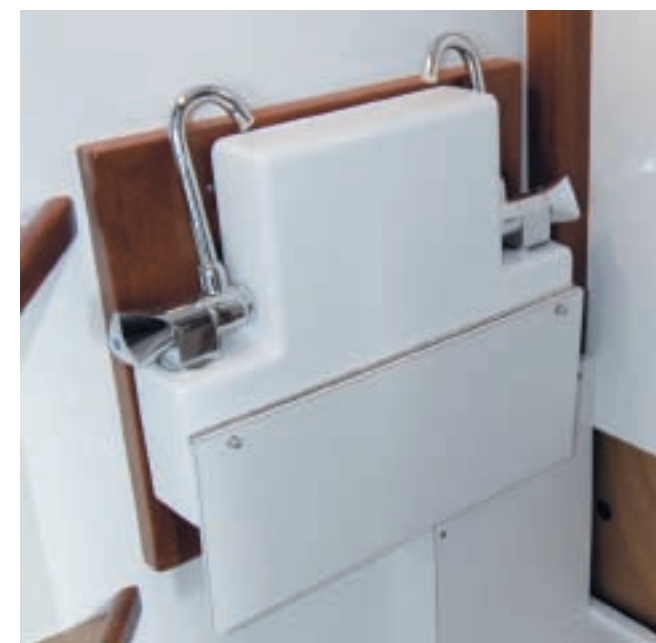
"My idea was to be totally self-contained," George says. "We have the dry head and no generator. We have three batteries, for house and starting."

The boat has three heat sources: forced-air heat from the engine's hot-water loop, the Dickinson, and small electric heaters for times when the boat is hooked up to shorepower.

There are no view-blocking overhead cabinets in the boat, and the design provides good storage in cabinets in the galley and below the settee and helm seat. Dishes are stowed in a niche just beyond the sink under the narrow side deck. The pilot's seat is forward of the galley.

The head is to port, and that's where we found the Pullman sink. Designed originally for use on Pullman railroad cars, these sinks fold up against a bulkhead when not in use. Devlin and Bishoprick tried to find an original Pullman sink but wound up building a mold and making one from fiberglass. I tried it and found that it opens and closes easily.

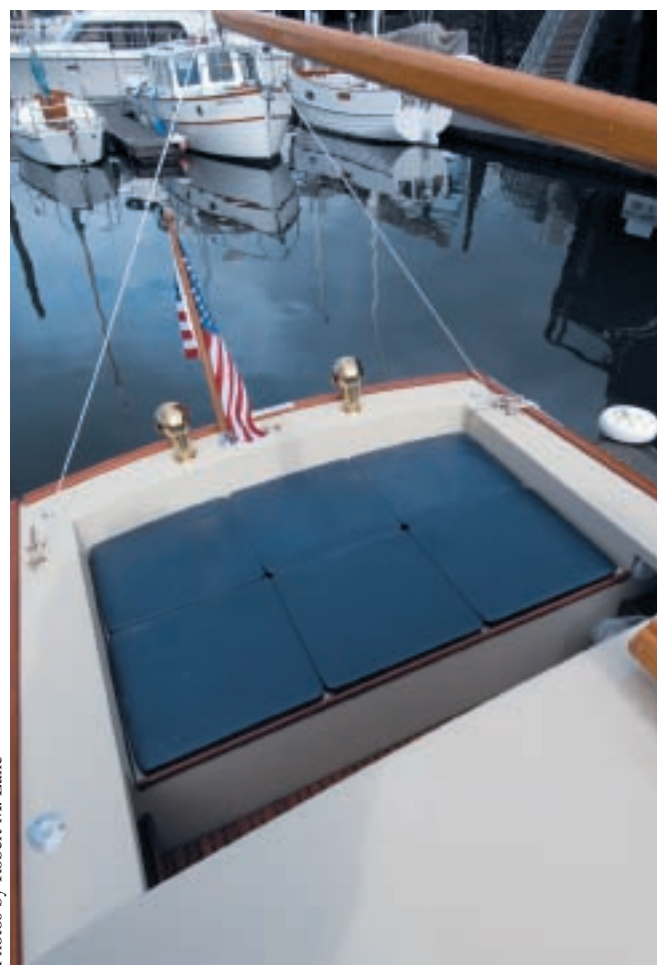
I've seen Pullman-style sinks on other boats, some decades old, and even some on early Taiwan trawlers, but they are not likely to be found on new craft today.



Photos by Robert M. Lane

Top: The head has no shower (it's in the cockpit), but it does have a folding Pullman sink on the bulkhead above the toilet. Above: With the sink tucked away, this small space opens up.

They do make good use of limited space. The marine toilet flushes with fresh water and has a 9-gallon holding tank. It may be emptied at a dock through a deck fitting or pumped at sea.



Photos by Robert M. Lane

Forward of the head on the port side is a settee or lounge. The on-watch crew member may sit on the forward end of the lounge and dangle his or her feet over the end into the stateroom area. This seating arrangement provides a good view ahead and easy conversation with the person at the helm. A backrest would be nice for long days. I saw none on *Zelda Belle*, but I have seen a backrest on an earlier model Surf Scoter.

The 26 carries 90 gallons of fuel in two aluminum tanks, one on each side of the cabin beneath the settee and cabinetry. Lift the settee cushion, and you'll find a fuel gauge.

During the day, the forward sleeping area may be rigged as a lounge. Cushions that normally fill the broad open end of the V-berth may be placed against the hull and the supporting boards stowed away. George quickly rigged the space for sleeping, creating a generous berth.

The boat's 54-gallon composite water tank is beneath the berth. A sight glass is easily visible on the front of the cabinet containing the tank.

While Devlin's design offered some storage in the sleeping area, the LaBoutilliers found a place for two additional bins next to the curve in the hull. The Legendary shipwrights built them.

KEEP IT DRY

One good reason for sheathing a plywood boat with glass fabric and resin is to keep water out. I asked Devlin how he prevents water intrusion into the plywood and mahogany caprail when holes are drilled for mounting rail stanchions, the anchor windlass, and other deck gear. This equipment is through-bolted, with backing, but any hole through the deck or caprails has leak potential.

Devlin said shipwrights bore oversized holes for each mounting bolt. The exposed wood is sealed with epoxy, and the holes are filled with epoxy. After the epoxy cures, properly sized bolt holes are bored through it, and the equipment is bedded and secured. Should water penetrate the bedding, it won't seep into the wood.

This is good, because we took the Surf Scoter out into Budd Inlet and gave her a good soaking.

It had been several years since I had piloted a boat with an outdrive, and I was a little surprised by how mushy the steering was at dead slow speed. Steering response was predictable despite that, and we had no problem escaping the marina.

Once clear, I revved the engine at about 200 rpm, and steering instantly became tight and responsive.

We steered first from the cockpit helm while standing on the folding platform. The extra foot of elevation provided a good view over the roof and of the sea ahead, and it will be convenient for making

Top: A single economical Volvo powers the boat from a tidy space below decks. One can kneel on the unfinished slats to reach the aft spaces. The varnished grate forward of the engine may be lifted for access to more storage beneath the deck. Above: Thick cushions make the engine cover a comfortable lounge. Because it's 73 inches wide, it could be a nice place to nap. A dodger suspended over the lifting boom will protect cruisers from rain and too much sun.



Photos by Robert M. Lane



Above left: A folding platform gives the skipper a good view forward when steering from the aft station. This will be convenient when approaching a moorage. Top and above right: Under way in Budd Inlet, *Zelda Belle* slices through waves, taking on spray that is quickly wiped away.

landings. George decided not to put instrument repeaters near the cockpit steering station, although the need for at least a depth sounder was obvious as we followed markers through the shoals off the Olympia waterfront. George had to go to the forward helm several times to check water depth, and I had to change course to keep the boat out of the mud. I think a knotmeter at the cockpit helm would be good, too, because speed limits are common in waters around urban areas.

George installed an integrated Garmin electronics package. It came with a wireless remote for the autopilot, a great idea because it works from anyplace on the boat without a cable to trip over.

One place George plans to use the remote is from a spot on the roof of the boat. There's an opening

skylight hatch above the helm, and he plans to climb onto the roof, sit on the edge of the hatch, and let his legs hang inside the boat, the wind in his face. With the autopilot remote, he will be in charge. With three steering stations available, he shouldn't get bored.

The helm was designed for the single 12-inch Garmin monitor. Most of the usual engine gauges are on the wall to the right of the helm at knee level. Instruments reporting pressures and temperatures don't need to be front and center. However, the tachometer shares that space, and it's awkward to shift in the seat and twist and bend to check engine rpm. The tachometer should be on the central panel.

There was a light wind on the inlet, and *Serendipity* left a little wake for us to smash through. *Zelda Belle* sliced it with ease.

**SURF SCOTER 26**

LENGTH	26' 4"
BEAM	8' 5"
DRAFT	2' 3"
DISPLACEMENT	5,980 lb.
ENGINE	160hp Volvo Penta
BASE PRICE	\$188,500
PRICED AS <i>ZELDA BELLE</i>	\$225,000

For more information:
Devlin Designing Boat Builders
360.866.0164
devlinboat.com

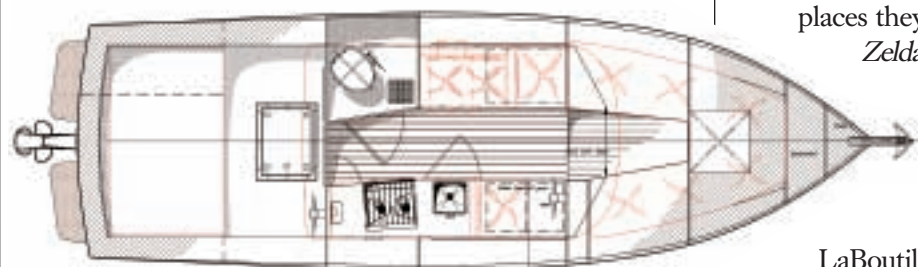


Illustration by Sam Devlin

Like other responsible boaters bound for Alaska, George and Stepper will need to carefully monitor weather reports and stay in port when conditions deteriorate. With care, the Surf Scoter should get the couple to any destination they choose.

ON THE ROAD

The Surf Scoter 26 has a beam of 8 feet 5 inches and may be carried on a trailer. The LaBoutilliers bought a 3/4-ton diesel-powered Dodge pickup truck and a three-axle King trailer to complete their cruising package.

Although their roots still are deep in Ohio, George and Stepper own a condominium in a Washington seaport. They have reserved a secure parking space for the boat and trailer during the off season.

George says the truck and trailer give them great flexibility in planning cruises. For example, in some places they may cruise to a favorite destination on *Zelda Belle* and then get the truck to haul her on to another adventure, eliminating the need to backtrack along a route they've just followed.

This is a boat built for two people who can travel lightly. Obviously, the

LaBoutilliers will need to exercise restraint in packing for a cruise. Although Devlin designed well in finding space for storage in cabinets and below decks, I'm sure George and Stepper will bring more aboard than can be stowed. I would imagine they'll leave some stuff in the truck.

It's likely they'll need to stop every few days for fuel and groceries, particularly perishable fruits and vegetables. This is not a bad thing. In cruising I've found that some of the most memorable people show up on the dock, bound for the same grocery and filled with great boating stories.

Coming from a sailing background (George's father crossed the Atlantic four times under sail), the LaBoutilliers know the East Coast. They are considering launching *Zelda Belle* at Port St. Lucie, Florida, and taking her to the Bahamas. "It's only four hours in this boat," George says. "I've been going there 40 years, and we can island hop.

"We've not cruised the Chesapeake or the ICW," he continues. Stepper adds: "And there are so many beautiful lakes to explore."

Small-boat cruising will be an adventure, Stepper says, even though there's been adventure aplenty in their lives, including a 100-mile kayak trip on the Thames River in England. "It's also an experiment," she adds.

Keep in touch. Send a postcard, please. 

At 1800 rpm, our speed was 7.7 knots. The sound level was 70 decibels (A scale). At 2400 rpm, our speed increased to 10.2 knots, and the sound meter read 78dBA. Normal conversation was possible but a bit strained. Surprisingly, at 3000 rpm the decibel level dropped to 76dBA, a significant improvement, while speed rose to 15.1 knots.

At full throttle, the engine was turning 3900 rpm and the boat speed was 21 knots. The noise level was 78-79dBA.

There were three adults aboard, and the tanks were about 75 percent full.

Spray splashed across the windscreen as we sped through the small chop, but wipers cleared it away. Later, when I transferred to *Serendipity*, the wind increased and I watched sheets of spray soar as *Zelda Belle* romped across the inlet. When we returned to the moorage, her blue hull was spotted with salt crystals, and George went for the dock hose.

I don't think I would take the Surf Scoter across Dixon Entrance (at the Pacific Ocean boundary between Canada and Alaska) with 6- or 8-foot seas rolling in at short intervals and pounding the port bow. I wouldn't take any boat out there under those conditions.