



**T**he idea of keeping a valuable boat out of the water is not exactly new. In years gone by, it was common practice for wealthy boatowners to keep their boat on a railway-type slip next to their house, or boatshed.

Over the years though, as waterfront land became more valuable, the traditional 'boatshed' started to disappear off the waterfront, replaced in many cases by incredibly expensive townhouses and home units.

With waterfront land at an absolute premium in capital cities, the notion of putting in a traditional railway type slipway to keep the owner's boat out of the water, has virtually disappeared.

Nevertheless, the notion of keeping a valuable boat out of the water has a great deal of merit, and in the 1960's and 1970's, marinas and boatyards right across Australia realised there was considerable demand for yard or dry-berth storage. By the 1980's, boatowners had plenty of opportunities to store their boats on the hard, in anything ranging from a cowshed to a sophisticated rack and stack

# AirBerth Boat Lift System

Report by F&B Editor Peter Webster



storage system.

But most of these dry facilities are limited to about 8.0m boats, as it is difficult to pick up and move a boat much heavier than 2-3 tonnes (usually about 8.0m) with a forklift. If the yard has to use a Travel lift or hoist-type crane, then vastly increased capital expense is involved in the equipment, and higher servicing costs become evident. Additionally, it's much harder to put down (and pick up) boats larger than 8.0 or 9.0 metres.

In the 1980's and 1990's, the idea of keeping your boat at the marina blossomed right around Australia. There are now over 130 marinas in Australia, storing upwards of 40,000 boats, in combinations of wet and dry berths. Generally speaking, dry berths outrank the wet berths for smaller craft, but the tables are reversed with

Andy Chan and F&B's Ruth Cunningham at the air controls for a typical AirBerth installation

boats beyond 7.0-8.0m LOA.

With the popularity of marinas growing year by year, needless to say, the costs of keeping a boat at these increasingly sophisticated "lifestyle" marinas, went up too.

Today it's not uncommon for marinas to charge anywhere from \$2,500 pa to \$10,000 pa for quite small craft.

Not surprisingly, in recent years increasing numbers of boatowners have been looking into alternatives to keeping their boat at the local marina.

It's no coincidence that Australia has enjoyed a wonderful boom in waterfront canal estates around Australia too, and today, we have a situation where literally thousands of boatowners enjoy a waterfront lifestyle and have their own jetty or pontoon system.

Okay – we can see where this is going! We've almost come full circle, haven't we?

Now we have a situation where demand is forcing professional marina charges up, boatowners' investment in pleasure boats has increased exponentially (especially in the last decade) and many boatowners have now purchased a waterfront or canal type home. Completing the circle, this again enables them to keep their boat at home, sometimes more cost efficiently than they can at the local marina – providing their community has one.

And there are dozens of popular communities throughout Australia where canal estates have been so successful, a marina actually isn't viable – because all the boatowners prefer to keep their craft on their waterfront jetty at the bottom of the garden!

And who can blame them? There is nothing quite so satisfying as being able to walk down to the bottom of your garden and step onboard your own boat, or just stand on the lawn and check that everything is okay with the covers, the aerials, etc.

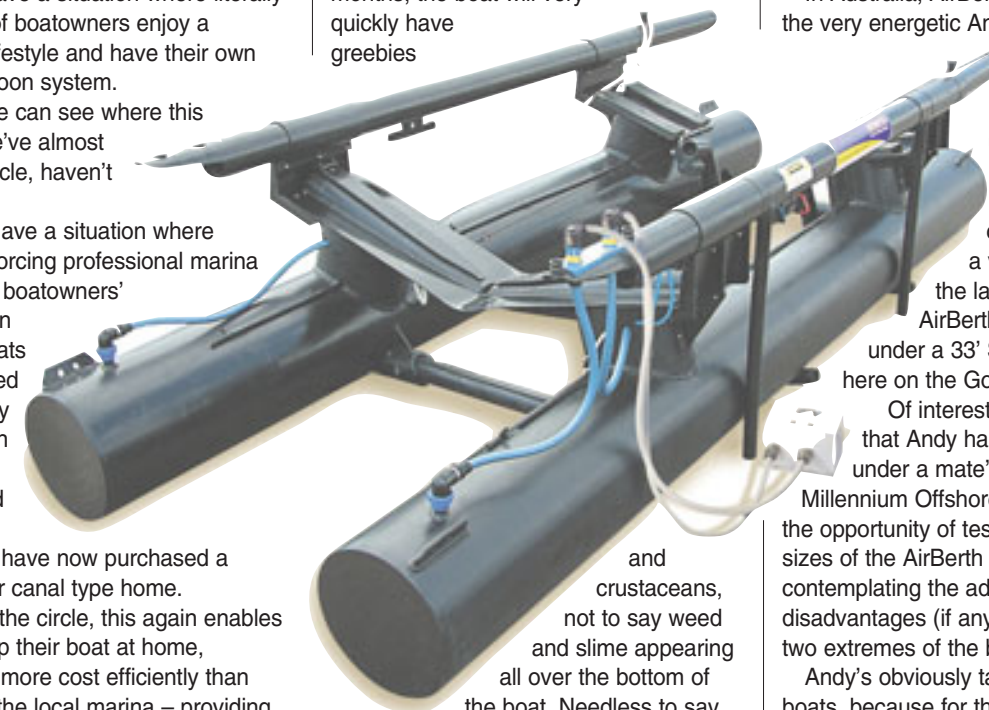
And of course there's the issue of convenience – it's impossible to be more convenient than having the boat at the bottom of the garden, especially if you're living and playing in some of these coastal communities where the fishing grounds can be accessed under the

bridge, across the bay, and out into the ocean.

Coming back to your own home is a really special privilege and a wonderful way to conclude a day on the water.

But this is where we come back full circle – many boatowners have now realised that the only drawback of keeping their boat at the bottom of the garden is the constant and repetitious application of very expensive anti-foulings – and there are no exceptions to this rule.

Wherever a boat is kept in the water around Australia, anti-fouling will be required. Within a matter of weeks, not months, the boat will very quickly have greebies



and crustaceans, not to say weed and slime appearing all over the bottom of the boat. Needless to say

this kills the boat's performance very quickly. Left for 6-9 months, the boat can quickly take on the effect of an artificial reef, and there are quite a lot of cases where people have gone overseas and returned home to find a new FAD at the bottom of the garden!

What boatowners needed, was some sort of slipway where they could lift the boat or winch the boat out of the water . . . without going onto the real estate.

**The AirBerth System** Some time ago, the concept of putting two long, polyethylene cylinders together under a boat in such a way that they could be pumped full of air and lifted clean out of the water, was born.

Indeed, the principle of using low-pressure air to lift these boats out of the water is also a very old one, and it's not really all that removed from the traditional

Dry Dock that's been around since the beginning of the last century.

Whatever – today, sophisticated machinery produces these long black polyethylene cylinders to very carefully calculated lengths, and equally, the cross framing and support systems are engineered in this amazing plastic material.

In fact, the AirBerth cylinders are designed and engineered in Australia, but manufactured in Malaysia and brought into Australia, such is the complexity of the manufacturing process and the fact that the AirBerth system is now being sold throughout the world.

In Australia, AirBerth is headed up by the very energetic Andy Chan, a young bloke who is determined not to let the grass grow under his feet very easily!

Andy recently contacted F&B with a view to showing us the latest "big mother" AirBerth they've installed under a 33' Sea Ray at a venue here on the Gold Coast.

Of interest too, we discovered that Andy has had an AirBerth under a mate's Quintrex 6.0m Millennium Offshore, and thus we had the opportunity of testing two different sizes of the AirBerth system, and contemplating the advantages and disadvantages (if any) of the system at two extremes of the boat market.

Andy's obviously targeting the bigger boats, because for them, it's easier to rationalise the investment that might be as much as (say) \$30,000-\$40,000 for a big rig, than it is on a Quintrex type boat of around 6.0m in length where the installation will cost upwards of \$13,000-\$15,000 for a typical professional installation supplied and installed.

Needless to say, the difference in real terms for the bigger boatowner is far less than it is to the smaller boatowner – but Andy is adamant that there is as much application or need in the smaller craft for this system, as there is in the bigger ones.

"The fact is," he told F&B. "It's quite easy today for people to invest upwards of \$120,000 in something like one of the lovely new 7.0m Whittleys, or \$90,000 in a big Signature, so why shouldn't they have the investment protection of an AirBerth, for exactly the same reasons as the purchaser of say a Sea Ray or Riviera who might be spending two or