

# Prized pilothouse possessions

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEFF MERRILL



The pilothouse is the nerve center of a power voyaging vessel like this Selene 43 in the Bahamas.

In my more than 30 years as a boat builder/yacht broker, I have enjoyed visiting hundreds of pilothouses. From 30 feet to 100 feet, tiny to opulent, at boat shows for a quick walk-through and underway for days on end. My career has allowed me to cruise thousands of miles offshore — standing watch, drinking coffee and observing (mostly with clients doing training deliveries). You can learn something from every boat you visit if you look around with an open mind. That’s how I’ve compiled my list of pilothouse add-ons.

I travel with a camera and all of those clicks have resulted in a huge collection of images

cataloging the items skippers consider convenient necessities. Most of the trawlers I’m on are run by owner-operators, not professional crew. Typically, they are an adventurous couple organizing, managing and maintaining their trawler by themselves. One thing all boaters seem to share is the propensity to find creative solutions.

We are all familiar with what is standard equipment and expected gear in a wheelhouse. “That’s a good idea” and “Why didn’t I think of that?” blend together when I see a new tip or trick. I light up with excitement, take a photo and add it to my list. This list has become long and I’ve come to accept

that it will never be complete. It seems like now is as good a time as any to show others some of my discoveries. I’ve compiled some of my favorites here.

My job as a trawler specialist lets me help people find the right boat and understand how to enjoy it. I’m continually searching for ways to explain what I have learned and assist with selections. In my TrawlerFest presentation, “Offshore Essentials,” (given back in the pre-COVID pandemic days) I led an exercise where we took a few minutes to prioritize 15 essential navigation tools. I typed up 15 nav/com features with space to the side for each student to write in their preference. It’s interesting to tabulate the results and review the favorites from each class. By hearing what others selected, everyone realized that all of this gear has an important function. Over many classes, there have been several different favorites, including: VHF radio, compass, depth sounder and radar. The point of the drill is to show that there are many helpful components, and to encourage everyone to understand how they work and how to interpret the information they provide to become a better boat handler.

I like to think of the pilot-house as the head and brains of your trawler. The recommendations highlighted in the list below represent “extras,” mostly loose items with a purpose. Some may not appear useful to have on board (until you need them). Once you leave the dock and realize what you are missing, you have to wait until you return to port to get it. I’m skipping over the built-in equipment and standard nav/com installations such as: depth, GPS, VHF, autopilot, radar, chart plotter, AIS and compass to name a few. Mechanical equipment and machinery controls are also purposely ignored — engine shift, windlass, horn, thrusters, stabilizers, watermaker, wipers, generator, air conditioning, etc. Smartphones and tablets with apps are omnipresent, so I’m leaving them out as well. For good practice, I am going to take it as a given that you have paper charts, dividers, parallels, guidebooks and the USCG COLREGS book. See, you already have a lot of stuff!

Here are some of my favorites (unranked) in each of the categories:

### Navigation

- Red triangle and green square channel marker guide (quick-look reminder to stay in the channel)
- Stabilized binoculars (easier to look through in rough seas)
- Hand-held rangefinder (dis-

- tance calculator between ships underway or anchored)
- Hand bearing compass (for determining intercepting courses)
- Red plastic film for displays (night vision cover if you can’t dim)
- Lead line (for sounding the bottom in shallow water)
- Pencil rack for pencils and chart dividers, plus pencil sharpener (for plotting on paper charts)
- Mesh lead pellet dive weights from SCUBA belts (to hold down paper charts)
- Weems & Plath COLREGS LIGHTRule (night lights navigation decoder)
- Magnifying glass (for reading charts)
- Lens cleaner and microfiber cloth (for wiping monitors)
- Calculator (distances, fuel burn, etc.)
- Post-it notes (to keep a log of the course you are steering

so you can return if you have to dodge).

### Communication

Wireless headsets (normal

- voice talking when docking and anchoring)
- Megaphone (for louder voice greetings to other boaters, kayakers, etc.)
- Air horn (portable sound warning device)
- Hand-held VHF (backup and eavesdrop)
- Hand-held Walkie Talkies (portable for short range talk)
- Garmin inReach (for texting to shoreside contacts).



Above, a hull details label for ready reference. Left, a channel red/green reminder stick. Below left, a collection of useful pilot-house tools.





Left, dive weights used to hold down paper charts. Below, inflatable PFDs and a Rescue Stick in the pilothouse ready for use.

to fellow cruisers so they remember you)

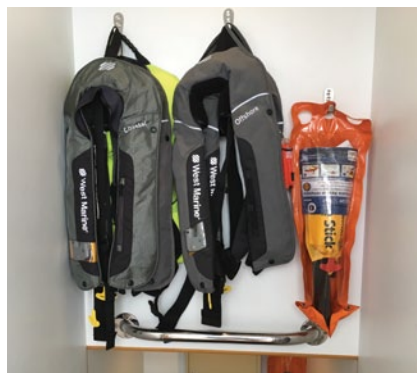
Hull details label (vessel facts/dimensions summary — name, call sign, draft, beam, bridge clearance, etc.)  
Blue tape and Sharpie pen (for reminders, labels, notes, reducing glare of bright lights at night, etc.).

### Safety

- Ditch bag (filled with abandon-ship gear)
- Inflatable harness (with whistle and strobe for walking on deck)
- PLB (personal locator beacon for each crewmember)
- Mustang Rescue Stick (small baton throw device with flotation)
- Egg timer (watch/alarm reminder)
- Gloves (hand protection for dock lines and anchoring)
- Sunglasses (outside) & safety glasses (machinery spaces)
- Hand-held searchlight (portable patrol at night)
- Split tennis ball (to put on engine RPM shift when towing your dinghy — obvious reminder)
- Smoke alarm below dash near electrical equipment (early electrical fire warning).

### Comfort and convenience

- Cookie bucket (plastic tub with snacks that won't spill, and will also double as a collection bin if you are feeling queasy and need to "toss" your cookies)
- Trash can (with a lid for organizing rubbish — lined with plastic bag)
- Small plastic bin with lid (for collecting loose fasteners, nuts, screws, washers, etc. in one place)



- Fly swatter or a small portable vacuum (for eliminating annoying insects)
- GelPro soft foam pad or equivalent (for tired feet when standing on watch)
- Window cleaner inside/Rain-X or Aquapel outside (to improve wind-screen visibility)
- Bicycle air pump and funnel for replenishing steering hydraulic reservoir (if so equipped)
- Level gauge (to visualize trim — fore/aft and side/side)
- Drink holders (caddies to prevent spilling)
- Bug screens (on doors and windows)
- Sunshade (for forward pilothouse windows, similar to the visors in your car)
- Vessel rubber stamp (for international travel with boat image, name and official number)
- Boat cards (business cards with picture of your boat and your names to give

I'll continue my quest to search for new and unusual, unique and simple, common-sense ideas that make boating safer and more enjoyable. Keep in mind that some of this is also appropriate on your flybridge.

Since this is an evergreen list, I've posted a comprehensive photo gallery on my website, JMYS.com. Go to the Owners in Charge section, then "Wheelhouse Wonders." I'll update this over time. If you have a suggestion, please email me [Jeff@JMYS.com](mailto:Jeff@JMYS.com) and put "Wheelhouse Wonders" in the subject line along with a photo and brief description. Please tell me what it is, how it is used and include your permission for me to publish it online. ■

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