
SAIL LOFT VISIT

Use this section as a guide in selecting a sail loft to repair your sails.

While you can fix just about any sail damage using glue and hand-sewing, a professional sailmaker can almost always effect a neater repair. Also, a sailmaker will be able to do a better job of inspecting your sails for wear when they are spread out on a large floor than you can on your deck. When you are ready to give up your sails for a few days, here are a few things to consider.

SELECTING A SAIL REPAIR LOFT

It doesn't take much of an investment to open up a sail repair shop. You can find one near most any harbor big enough to hold a dozen boats. Some are better than others and we don't have any great suggestions for how to tell the difference. It basically comes down to the availability and condition of the machines, the skill level and attitude of the staff and whether or not they have materials on hand that match your damaged sail.

A look at the facilities might not tell you a lot. Sail lofts that do a significant amount of business tend to be very untidy places, especially towards the end of the workday. Don't be surprised to see piles of sails and overflowing bins of scraps ringing the work floor. That is the sign of a busy shop. Untidy is not the same as dirty.

Dirt

In a perfect world the sail loft should be free of dirt. But of course the world is not perfect and dirt is a big problem for sail loft owners. If the loft is air conditioned it will be cleaner, the machines will run better and the employees won't be sweating on your sails. For sail lofts in smaller markets, the cost of air conditioning a large work space is usually prohibitively high. If the loft is located on an island in the tropics, chances are it is surrounded by dirt roads, the windows are open and the trade winds are pumping a fine silt onto the floor 10 hours a day. That's just the way it is. If you see some evidence that the staff is doing battle with their dirt problem, then don't worry about it. If, on the other hand, you sense that they have given up the fight, it might be an indication of an overall malaise and a signal that you should check out the competition. Dirt on the floor will not have a long-term effect on your sail. An hour of sailing in the rain will take care of that. The bigger issue is that, if the loft is covered with dirt, so are the sewing machines and the dirtier the machine, the more difficult it is to keep it properly timed and tensioned.

Given the choice, cleaner is preferable to dirtier.

Floor Space

A sail loft with a large uncluttered floor will do a better job of inspecting your sail than one with less room to spread the work out. The larger the floor and the more open space around the sewing stations, the less

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your sail will be crunched up to maneuver it under the sewing heads of the machines. If your sail requires work along an entire edge, (a new luff tape, headsail sun cover replacement, damaged spinnaker leech, etc.) it is very important that the sail loft have a space large enough to spread that edge out flat on the floor.

Given the choice, more open space is preferable to less.

Franchise vs. Independent Loft

It is safe to say that all of the major, brand-name sailmaking companies produce a product with good value. The men and women that own the brand are careful to protect their reputation, so if they had enough confidence to sign up a repair loft as a dealer, that is typically an indication that the repair loft works to a reasonably high standard. On the other hand, there are hundreds of strong independent sailmaking businesses that choose to remain independent. A well known logo is not always an indication of a superior standard of operations.

Production Loft vs. Repair Loft

Sail lofts that build and repair sails are typically larger and more profitable businesses than repair-only shops. A production loft will likely have a better selection of materials and more specialized machines than a repair loft. That doesn't guarantee that the most knowledgeable sailmaker at the production facility will have the time to work on your project. But given an equally skilled sailmaker, and a comparable delivery schedule, a facility that produces sails will likely have the resources to do a better job on a large repair than one that is set up only for repairs.



A messy sail loft is not necessarily the sign of a staff that doesn't care. They may just be too busy to stop and straighten up.

WORKING WITH THE LOFT

Before you bring in your sails:

- ☐ Write a list of what you want accomplished.
- ☐ Mark any small rips or holes with tape so the sailmakers don't miss them.
- ☐ Pack the sails up as neatly as possible. If your sails arrive well cared for, the staff might look after them a little better.
- ☐ Remove any gear that does not need to be worked on.
- ☐ Bring any materials from your repair kit that the sailloft may not have in stock.
- ☐ Before you leave the sail loft make sure that you and the loft have made similar lists of all the property you have left behind—sails, bags, battens, spares and sail ties.
- ☐ Before you return to pick up your sails, buy the sailmaker a six-pack of good beer.

Staff

By far the most important criterion for selecting a sailmaker will be the skill level and attitude of the person who will do the work, or supervise the staff that does the work. Talk directly with the person who will be responsible for making sure your repair job is completed correctly and on time. Explain what needs to be done to your sail and ask if he or she has the time, materials and equipment to do the job. Ask to see an example of a similar repair if there is one in the shop. Check for yourself to make sure the repair materials are a good match for the sail.

I believe that a good mechanic can explain any problem with a car or motor in terms that a customer can understand. If a mechanic tells me that the vacuum pump solenoid actuator valve needs to be realigned with the main decompression spring, I am tempted to run out the door fearing for the safety of both my wallet and my machine. If you find a sailmaker who will talk to you in straightforward, clear terms, you probably found one that knows what they are doing. There is very little incentive for the sailmaker to mislead you. If the sail loft's machines are too small for the job, the sailmaker won't risk breaking them.

WORKING WITH THE LOFT

Before you bring in your sails call ahead.

Do yourself and the sailmaker the favor of scheduling the time to drop off your sails. Very few repair lofts have a large enough staff for a true service manager. If the shop is making money, everyone is fixing sails. The very beginning and end of the working days are often the best times to get the sail maker's attention, so you are not pulling him off a job in progress. If that does not fit your schedule, a call ahead will at least prepare him to break off for 20 minutes to talk to you.

Bring a Work List

Write down exactly what you want done to each sail before you leave your boat. If you really know what you need, you can probably fill out your own work order. If the only thing on your list is "check-over," you might want to reconsider the need to go to the loft at all. Read the Damage Cause and Prevention section of this book (page 46) and you can do the check-over yourself.

Clean and Dry the Sails

Okay, this is usually pretty hard to do on board a boat. If you trashed your spinnaker it probably fell in the water and you will probably have to deliver it to the loft soaking wet. But keep in mind that the sailmaker can't work on your sails until they are dry and most shops can't stretch the sail out to dry during the workday because they need to be making money with the floor space. So add at least a day to the job for overnight drying time, or try to find a lawn or garage to spread the sails out to dry before you bring them to the loft.