

TEAKDECKING SYSTEMS

deck
 THE
 nails
 WITH
 teak



Ever wonder where that beautiful deck that feels so good on the feet came from? Many companies build custom decks for anything from swim platforms on tenders to promenade decks on cruise ships. Florida's own Teakdecking Systems, born in Sweden more than 30 years ago, has decking down to a science and still swears by teak.

STORY Marilyn de Martini

PHOTOS Teakdecking Systems



Teakdecking Systems built the decks of Trinity Yachts' *Mi Sueño*

TUCKED AWAY IN AN INDUSTRIAL PARK NEAR THE Sarasota, Fla., airport lies the largest and oldest manufacturer of marine teak decking in the United States, if not the world. Being miles from the nearest shipyard is not an issue, nor is the fact that Teakdecking Systems (TDS) is not a household name to those outside the marine industry. Anyone “in the know” about teak knows about this small, employee-owned business. From its simply structured 100,000-square-foot factory, more than 125,000 square feet of teak decking annually makes its way to cruise ships, yachts and smaller boats around the world.

Teak has been used for construction and shipbuilding for centuries because its intrinsic properties make it ideal for marine use. It is stable and does not warp, providing longevity and long-standing value; it does not attract insects, nor does it absorb moisture—and kiln drying

further enhances this important property. Teak can be installed non-treated, eliminating waxes and oils. In its natural state, teak provides a cool, non-slip surface. Because it is an insulator, it also helps reduce the load on a ship’s climate-control system. For use as decking, craftsmen traditionally installed it by hand, one plank at a time.

The Teakdecking System was born when a creative Swede, who was building a sailboat, thought of a way to complete the deck during the frigid Scandinavian winter. He could assemble the deck in his woodshop and then install it in the spring, saving considerable time. Instead of having to laboriously cut and place each plank individually, come springtime carpenters could focus on finishing the boat. His idea worked. He rallied a group of investors, including Lars Lewander, a specialist in shipbuilding (now president of the company), and they opened a small manufacturing plant in Stockholm.



TDS patented the system, which attaches teak planks with an epoxy adhesive to a thin, sturdy fiberglass surface. After the deck is caulked, panels (rather than individual planks) are installed on the boat. This system improves yachtbuilding and retrofitting efficiency, allowing construction to continue while the deck is being built. Skilled craftsmen can focus on other tasks while a deck is being installed. The technique, since it uses a backing, also allows using thinner planks, saving on material cost. Uniform caulking penetrates all the way through the wood, and adhesives save on screws and fasteners, translating to fewer leaks.

The boating boom in the early 1980s helped the company grow in Sweden and parts of Europe, and the owners looked at the United States as their next growth market. They settled on the Tampa Bay/Clearwater area, which housed a number of production-boat companies at the time and was close to Miami, home of the cruise-ship industry—a perfect market for new deck installation and retrofits.

Alan Brosilow, who sensed the potential, was one of TDS' first 10 employees. Each new boat helped spread the word through the marinas and the company helped by attending boat shows and talking to their peers.

“We were boatbuilders talking to boatbuilders, so we spoke through knowledge,” says Brosilow, who is now manager of yacht services.

Although there was reluctance at first, with shipyards favoring

the old, traditional way of deck building, little by little, the sheer practicality of the pre-fabricated decks caught on. TDS outgrew its original 10,000-square-foot Bradenton factory and eventually moved to its current facility, which is 10 times as large as the original one. It was, however, a slow and conservative growth, relying on all three of its divisions: the boat, yacht and cruise divisions.

Lewander also had the vision to introduce an employee stock ownership plan, allowing the staff to be vested in the company's growth and future. This gave each craftsman a say in how the company would operate and tackle challenges. For the most part, they decided to find the answers in-house.

When the quality of teak was in question, TDS decided to do its own sourcing from Southeast Asia, where in the mid-1800s a German botanist started a sustainable forestry system that is still practiced today. This appealed to TDS, which uses only native Southeast Asian teak (no cultivated wood or wood coming from unregulated plantations). To use elephants (which is part of the TDS logo) to haul individual logs may seem archaic, but it is better than the proliferation of logging roads, which can lead to over production and clear cutting. Only trees that are at least 50 years old are cut, as they have tighter growth rings that make for stronger teak planks. A sapling is planted for each cut tree, ensuring the longevity of the forest region. TDS maintains that its system is more “green” than imitation teak laminates that are petroleum-based, non-recyclable or



The open floor of the factory accommodates a teak deck for a megayacht: talk about a puzzle! A lot of training, time and experience is required before craftsmen work on the actual deck assembly, a process that is much more high-tech than it looks; Teadecking also creates custom designs for smaller areas

sustainable, and are hot underfoot. Though teak is more expensive, “There is no value in using an inferior product,” Brosilow says.

Another challenge arose when the adhesive and caulking products commercially available for the marine industry were not to company standards. TDS hired chemists and developed its own marine-grade products and now produces them in-house. The company sells 10,000 gallons of its proprietary caulking and adhesives per year. So other companies now use TDS’ products and the system is imitated around the world, even in China.

“We know we are only as good as our last job,” Brasilow says, which

is a good motivator. “We maintain the ‘Gold Standard’ because we maintain the quality.” That company pride feeds the employee-owned structure. While the first generation of TDS is now thinking about retirement and passing the torch, they have brought in the second generation and now have a third generation training through an apprenticeship program.

“You have to have some basic woodworking knowledge,” Brosilow says of the training program that has just graduated two marine school students to full installers—a process that starts with learning how to sort large quantities of wood. TDS has millions of dollars of

teak in storage, ready for construction, and each plank must be inspected for thickness, grain and suitability for various uses. It's an expensive material, so the company ensures little waste occurs; miscellaneous pieces are used for trim, rails or interior details.

From this first step, workers then move into assembly, learning the fine skills of trim carpentry before moving into production boatbuilding. Learning how to read blueprints and work with CAD drawings for exact measurements is essential when the blend of fine craftsmanship meets technology. TDS does not use manufacturers' drawings for measurements but makes its own or instructs clients on how to make exact templates from lightweight plywood; then the templates are digitized into CAD drawings so that all measurements, layouts and placement of hardware can be transferred to computerized specifications.

After mastering these skills, workers move to making pre-assembled sections into actual deck and flooring, ready for sanding and fixtures. By the time a TDS employee reaches the title of Project Supervisor, he has done every job in the company and can address each phase of construction and installation. Teakdecking Systems also creates a variety of designs for interior trim and flooring, using exotic woods, intricate patterns and inlays, adding custom designer touches for the finest of yachts and cruises ships.

"We've been with them since Hull No. 1 in 1990," says William S. Smith III of Trinity Yachts. "They're still around 21 years later—what does that tell you? We know if a customer sees something on a yacht anywhere in the world and wants to know if we can do it, the answer is, 'Yes.' And not only can we do it, but we can take it to the next level. Those guys are at the top of their game."

The open, outdoor, carpenter-shop feeling of the factory belies the technicality that lies within as 125 employees scurry about creating custom-built decks, stretched across the vast floor. While the wood drying occurs in tented areas, CNC machining, CAD drawings, digital transcription of the template data and technical plans are handled in modest offices. A mobile installation crew works from a Fort Lauderdale warehouse, servicing marinas and builders on-site while other crews travel around the world to where the assembled decks are delivered by container.

The deck for *Endeavour*, a historic 130-foot sailing yacht, was just assembled here and shipped to New Zealand where it was undergoing a refit, while a deck for *Hemisphere*, the world's largest catamaran, was recently completed. TDS also handled the teak decking for superyachts *Cakewalk* and *Mayan Queen*. "We always have a variety of boats from Hatteras and Chris-Craft and numerous sailboats like Morris and Hinckley to add to at least one really big project per year," Brosilow says. "We pride ourselves on never burning a bridge—we are about customer service and work with builders, captains and owners. This is a tough industry, and for 28 years, we've worked on tenders to 'gigayachts' and cruise ships. We believe we help build better boats today and want to pass this on to the next generation." ■

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