

CHOOSING A CRAFT

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The type, make and model of the craft you choose will be a personal thing. Before making any final decision you should get as much input as possible from knowledgeable tubers and tooners. Advice from others can be valuable but the ultimate choice needs to be based upon YOUR own wants, needs and abilities. And, a good policy is to always try before you buy...when you can.

This chapter highlights the most important considerations to review during your evaluation process. Some are obvious. Others less so. For many newbies the budget thing is the single biggest hurdle to becoming properly outfitted. Tubes and toons are less costly than boats but can still take a big chunk out of a tight budget.

Other factors in the review process are mostly related to your personal angling preferences along with your physical abilities. Equipment and design options might also influence your final decision. Then there are the potential limitations you might have for storing or transporting whatever craft you choose.

In the “olden days” we didn’t have many choices. We could choose either a round tube...or a round tube. The early models were simply fabric covers sewn together in a “donut” shape that held a 20” truck tire tube. These would float up to about two hundred and fifty pounds depending on the manufacturer and the cut of the cover. Later options included covers to fit the larger 22” truck tubes and would float anglers up to 300 pounds.

During the last 20 years of the 20th century great strides were made in the floatation fishing world. Manufacturers responded to the growing awareness and more knowledgeable demands of tubers and tooners and came up with a bajillion new designs.

It is increasingly rare to see a round tube on the waters anymore. Today’s floatation anglers tend to prefer open front tubes, pontubes or pontoons with oars and/or electric motors. But, when shopping for a new craft fancy design alone should not be the only basis upon which you make your final decision.



A husband and wife fly fishing team...she with a pontoon (and a carp)...he with a quality float tube setup...and a camera.. Choice of tube or toon...and/or what features and options are best...are mostly a matter of personal preference.

TUBES VS TOONS

As you might suspect there is no clear-cut simple reasoning to guide a prospective buyer into choosing either a float tube or a pontoon. It is a very subjective matter. And, there is no law against owning both...if you have the need, the budget, suitable transportation to carry them and the space to store them when not in use.

Float tubes have features, advantages and benefits that make them a better choice for some floatation fishermen. Pontoons will work better for others. Until you try one or both you probably won't be able to make the best long-term decision. It is not uncommon for anglers to start with one and switch to the other after gaining some experience. And, it is also common for serious floatation fans to own both...or multiple models...for varying fishing situations.

The remainder of this chapter continues to make comparisons between tubes and toons for most of the topics covered herein. For the sake of brevity and to provide a quick overview here are some bullet points for each:

FLOAT TUBES:

- Smaller and easier to transport than pontoons.
- Generally less costly than pontoons.
- Generally easier to propel with fin power alone and to hold position...hands free.
- Generally lower profile on the water...less wind resistance.
- Can be more easily maneuvered into smaller openings.
- Better for carrying/packing into waters not easily accessible from the road.
- Better for launching and fishing on very small waters.
- Limited in speed and range. Slower than pontoons and not able to cover as much water.
- Difficult to troll with any speed or for long periods.
- Harder to propel and maneuver against wind and waves...without oars or motors.
- Not as safe on moving water...especially big fast rivers.
- Lower seating height...less visibility into the water and reduced casting efficiency.
- Generally less storage space and cargo capacity than pontoons.

PONTOONS:

- Usually much larger, heavier and more difficult to transport and store.
- Usually more expensive, even for low-end models.
- Higher profile on the water increases wind resistance.
- Heavier and with more drag...more difficult to propel and/or control with fins alone.
- Oar power increases speed and range over float tubes...allows trolling.
- Usually set up for mounting electric trolling motors...for more speed and range.
- Ideal for trolling...with the proper electric motor and a good deep cycle battery.
- Suitable for running rivers...if large enough and sturdy enough.
- Not suitable for packing in to remote waters.
- Provides higher seating...better angle of visibility into water.
- Higher seating improves casting, line control and fish battling options.
- Usually more storage and cargo carrying capacity than tubes.
- Optional standing platform and lean bar increases fishing options.
- Greater floatation capacity and shallower launching requirements.

BODY SIZE, STRENGTH, CONDITION

As Dirty Harry said, in one of his films “A man should know his limitations.” That is good advice for tubers and tooners. You should never buy more system than you can comfortably afford, carry, launch or maneuver on the water. Conversely, you shouldn’t buy less craft than you need. If you are XXL or larger you should buy something that will hold your bulky self without constriction and a craft that will float you without concern for capsizing.

Most manufacturers rate their craft with a suggested safe weight load. To avoid potential litigation they typically underrate them. Most tubes and toons will float more than the suggested maximum without danger. You can fudge a little on weight but there is no reason to buy less than you require to keep you comfortably afloat and fishing efficiently. There are just too many good options available at reasonable prices.

You should also not buy a craft that is larger than you can handle by yourself. Tubing and tooning are sometimes best enjoyed as a solitary venture. It can be great therapy to be alone out on the water and enjoying the wonders of nature. Also, fishing buddies sometimes flake out at the last minute and don’t show for a planned trip. You need to be able to go it alone in loading, unloading, launching and handling your craft...and then loading it up again afterward.

You should also be able to power your craft around efficiently upon the waters without getting a hernia or stroke. If you are out of shape you should get back in shape...at least enough to be able to work your fins or oars for a day of fishing. If you have a pontoon with an electric motor you still need to be able to use the fins or oars in the event of battery or motor failure.

No matter how tough you are never push yourself to the brink of endurance or unnecessarily challenge the elements. As will be advocated elsewhere in this book do not put yourself or your craft in harm’s way. This includes avoiding motorized watercraft and getting off the water whenever there is the threat of dangerous weather.

FREQUENCY & DURATION OF USE

The harsh truth is that most newbies do not yet know enough about system options to appreciate the differences reflected in bigger price tags. Think about it. If you do not plan to go afloat very often, or very seriously, there is no need to put the family on welfare just so you can keep a “prestige” model tube or toon in your garage.

If you are still trying to decide whether or not floatation fishing is right for you buy a used system or settle for a basic unit that is rated to handle your weight and is affordable. You can always upgrade later once you become a full-fledged floataholic.

Those who upgrade later on can either keep their first craft as backups...or spares for family or friends who want to join them on the water. If not, you can sell your “starter kit” to recover some of your initial investment and to defray the costs of a newer and better system.

If you plan to sell your “firstborn” you need to keep it clean and undamaged. Used tubes and toons are generally not hard to sell. There are always other newbies coming into the sport who appreciate the opportunity to get started “gracefully” and economically.

Dedicated and experienced floatation-fishing addicts who spend lots of time in a tube or toon can easily justify upgrading. Once you know and appreciate the advantages of better quality and more efficient designs you are qualified to spend more money. However, that doesn’t mean you can ignore the mortgage, car payments or feeding the family.

Buying a better craft as a long-term fishing investment does not mean buying something with the most “bells and whistles”. Look for the features and options you want and need but also focus on real quality...in construction and in safety features.

You can't put a price tag on comfort and safety. The wrong time to regret buying cheap is when you have an "equipment malfunction" while you are a long ways from the safety of a shoreline. There is an old axiom that says, "It is better to spend a bit more than you wanted than not quite enough,"

BUDGET

Tubes and toons are often perceived as a "poor man's boat". They ARE less expensive than all but the oldest derelict boats. But, there IS an initial investment required to become fully outfitted...with tube or toon, waders, fins, boots, net, sonar, etc.

No matter how prices escalate you will probably always be able to buy a "low end" round tube for well under \$100. Better quality U-boats and V-boats are available for a few dollars more (sounds like a Clint Eastwood movie). But a quality float tube will usually be well over \$100, and the best will cost at least two or three "Benjamins". A good compromise between affordability and quality can get you a decent tube for less than \$200.

Pontoons cost more. Because of their two separate large air chambers and metal frames there are simply more costs in time and materials to produce one.

New pontoons can be found on special for under \$300 for a lightweight and basic craft. At that price range they are okay for infrequent trips on smaller waters for anglers on a budget. But, I would never risk taking a cheap toon down an ugly river. Depending upon various options in quality materials, construction, size and design, better one-man toons will range from about \$400 to over \$2,000. Plan to spend a lot more for a craft that will float two or more anglers.

If you buy a tube you will also have to buy fins, for propulsion. You can find adequate tubing fins for under \$50 but better quality diving fins will run from \$75 to \$200. If you have oars you don't need fins for a pontoon. But, they can be useful for hands-free fishing when there is no breeze to fight. They can also help you recover an oar or steer when under power.

Waders will put some more scorch marks on your plastic (credit cards). You can get by with one set of lightweight waders and just add layers for warmth in cold water. But, most serious tubers and tooners have both lightweights and neoprenes. The cheapest waders may be less than \$75 but "cheap" is usually the most expensive in the long run. They do not hold up well under serious use. Better waders will cost much more but should last several times as long. See the chapter on "Dress for Success"

Depending upon the type of waders you get, you will probably also need a pair of "wading boots" or neoprene "flats boots" to wear over the soft neoprene foot pockets while tubing or tooning. These protect your waders while walking in them over rough surfaces. Protective footwear will run anywhere from \$10 to well over \$100. Again, see "Dress for Success".

That's about it for the basic system. If you still have "discretionary" funds available you can further reduce your bank balance by spending it on nets, baskets, sonar system, GPS, walkie-talkies, etc. Suggestions are covered in two other chapters..."Add-ons" and "Pimping". Let's not even bring up the subject of costs for tackle and lures. That's a whole 'nother area.

Unless you are independently wealthy and price is no object you should not buy a floatation system without consideration of your family's financial situation. As much as we would like to consider fishing to be a necessity, for most of us it is a recreational luxury. As such, it cannot take priority over basic needs.

If your credit cards are maxed out and your kids have to beg you for lunch money you should not think about spending the money for even a modest floatation system. On the other hand, if your bills are current and you have some "net spendable" left in the bank then you have my permission to join "Floataholics Anonymous"...and our "12 cast program". By the way, that's where we all go fishing and nobody knows who we are.

When buying on a budget price is only one of the factors to consider. There is an old saying, “Good things aren’t cheap and cheap things aren’t good.” That is applicable to tubing and tooning. It is always a good idea to buy the best quality you can afford. After all, it’s only money. Right?

Projected usage should be a part of the budget consideration. If you are not going to be doing a lot of tubing or tooning you should not buy the most expensive stuff. However, if you plan to get serious about this new sport then go ahead and spend what is necessary to make your experience safer, more productive and more enjoyable.

Fishermen become skilled at rationalizing their “investments” in new goodies. Spouses grow weary of listening to our often-feeble attempts at justification. But, if you anticipate using a new tube or toon extensively over several years it can make sense to buy a quality craft that will last longer, keep you safer and increase your fishing enjoyment.

Okay, let’s put a pencil to it. Let’s say you become \$500 “lighter” to get fully outfitted for floatation fishing. First of all, if you were buying a fancy bass boat that would not even be enough for a down payment. For some of the pricier bass boats \$500 would hardly be a monthly payment. For a floatation system, that is the end. That’s all there is. Furthermore, there are no insurance costs, gasoline expenses, repairs, storage or other high maintenance outlays as with the boat.

There is really no comparison on a “cost-per-trip” basis. It costs you a lot of money just to keep a boat even if you don’t use it. Tubes and toons just rest patiently without expense waiting for us to take them to the water at our convenience.

Finally, because you can more easily afford to own and operate a tube or toon, and because you don’t have to mess with a trailer on every trip, you are likely to go fishing more often. Life is better for tubers and tooners.

For the sake of analysis, let’s say you use your craft only ten times a year over the next five years. Simple math suggests that you would be using it 50 times. That computes to about \$10 per trip. Heck fire! You can’t even go to a movie for that amount of money...even a bad movie. And, you probably spend at least that much more on fattening goodies and a drink. Tubing and tooning are a better value...and not as hazardous to your health.

Now if you get serious, and use your craft more than 10 times a year, for more than five years, your cost per trip drops to pocket change. Not to be judgmental but I might suggest that if you only fished 50 times in 5 years you are not a serious fisherman and you ain’t worthy of owning floatation fishing gear anyway.

VENUES AND LOGISTICS

Where do you fish most right now and where WOULD you fish most if you had a tube or toon? As the old admonition goes, “Don’t bring a gun to a knife fight”. Don’t spend more and buy bigger than you need. On the other hand don’t take on big water with a small craft.

If most of your fishing is going to be on ponds, small lakes or in protected coves of larger lakes, you can do very well with a float tube and fin power. A decent float tube system will handle almost anything except covering long distances on big waters...or floating through class 1 rapids.

Float tubes are ideal for backpacking. There are several models on the market that are especially made for the pack-in contingent. These specialized tubes are fabricated with light materials and usually have accompanying pack straps. Some are sold as complete backpack systems, with their own pack, air pump, etc.

Special backpack float tubes can be “spendy”. The good news is that you can assemble your own tube packing system through careful shopping and focus on weight reduction. Being able to get out amongst the risers on remote mountain lakes makes packing your tube well worth the effort.

Consider just how far you have to move your craft between your vehicle and your intended launch site. Even if you don't need a backpack you may need to carry or drag your craft a ways to the water. Float tubes are lighter and easier to manage by yourself. If you have to move a pontoon very far you might need a buddy to help you carry it. Otherwise you have to drag it (not recommended) or rig some kind of wheel transport system. (See the chapter on "Transportation")

If you plan to run rivers or work large areas of big waters you need a sturdy pontoon. Pontoons are inherently more "seaworthy" and offer greater floatation and safety. Plus, the addition of oars and/or an electric motor will let you safely and efficiently cover more water and help you to better handle current, wind and/or waves.

What about tubing and tooning in salt water? The same considerations apply. Float tubes with fins work fine when fishing in protected bays or marshes with little current,. You can also take your tube out off the beach into the open ocean on calm days with no wind and/or surf. Just be sure to monitor the tides and the weather to avoid taking an unscheduled international cruise.

Pontoons are great for fishing harbors, bays, channels, canals, marshes and most other protected salt-water fishing spots. Unlike tubes, however, they can also be efficiently and effectively fished in more open water ocean conditions. The additional speed and range provided by oars and/or an electric motor makes toons a better choice than tubes for fishing in less protected waters.

You can brave mild surf conditions with either tubes or toons. Doing so requires that you time your launch between pesky waves. A pontoon's oars will make a quick scoot out to calmer waters once you launch. Of course the waves should be manageable. You should never try to launch in surf heavy enough to "hang ten" or flip your craft. Be sure to read the chapter on Launching and Beaching.

That brings up a final point of comparison between tubes and toons in fishing salt water. Since pontoons float in shallower water, they are easier to bring in to the beach...at least during mild surf conditions. They can ride small waves right up onto the beach.

Trying to beach a float tube can make for a hairy ride even in mild surf. It is worse in a round tube because your legs hang down further. You have to be prepared to plant your feet as soon as the waves bring you into water shallow enough to stand and then avoid getting tumbled by the next waves as you shuffle backwards up beyond the reach of the surf.

Launching and beaching with open front tubes is better but still not as simple and safe as from a pontoon. If you sit up high, in one of the high floating tubes, you can also ride right up onto the beach. But, you still have to get up and out of your craft while avoiding the next waves. And, if you get turned around you can get washed butt over teakettle.

ANTICIPATED CONDITIONS

Just as important as the kind of waters you will be fishing is the set of conditions under which you will be fishing on any given day. Mama Nature can pitch a hissy fit and can quickly turn a quiet pond into something resembling the North Atlantic during a "perfect storm". What began as an ideal tubing venue can suddenly becomes questionable for anything less than a battleship.

Of course the reverse scenario might also apply. Pontoons are the only safe option on a big river while it is running full flow. However, many such rivers experience a drop in flow during the late summer. That usually leaves a few deep holes and backwaters without any current at all. When you find such calm spots you can safely launch and fish them from a float tube just as if it were a pond or small lake.

If the waters you like to fish have predictable weather patterns, it becomes easier to plan floatation trips and to select the type of craft you will need to handle the situation. For example, if it is usually calm early, but windy after midmorning, you can fish from a tube while it is calm. If a breeze comes up you can either quit fishing or switch to your pontoon.

Once aboard the toon you can either anchor up in a protected cove or use the oars or electric motor for trolling...and to get back in later.

Float tubes can be carried farther and easier than pontoons. They can also be launched on smaller waters with less room for launching. However, if you have to launch over sticky mud or rough rocks pontoons are better. Toons will float in only a few inches of water and allow you to sit up high without your feet below the surface.

When you launch a float tube you need depth to comfortably sit back and start kicking. In shallow water with a gradual slope away from the bank this means that you may have to slog your way across long stretches of rocks or mud to get launched...and while returning to shore. The longer you stand up and shuffle backwards the more potential there is for unpleasant outcomes.

If the waters you will be fishing are choked with aquatic vegetation pontoons will let you cruise over the top of the “salad” with no hang-ups. Tubers can become hopelessly bogged down in weeds that grow toward the surface.

On the other hand, if your favorite ponds are full of shoreline reeds, brush and stickups, the tube might well be a better craft than a toon. Float tubes are smaller and more maneuverable than pontoons. You can work a tube through smaller openings in reeds or shoreline vegetation. This can get you in position to flip big bass out of tight cover where they have been unmolested by boaters, tooners and bank tanglers.

TRANSPORTATION AND STORAGE

Tubers and tooners need to plan ahead for getting their craft down the road and to have a place to keep it between trips. Obviously, float tubes require less space to store or transport than pontoons...especially when aired to the max and ready for business. However, most pontoons are easily disassembled and the air chambers can be completely deflated. That makes it possible to fit them into a surprisingly small space either in your vehicle or garage.

All but the smallest SUVs can hold one or even two aired-up float tubes plus other gear. If you have a roof rack you can carry a tube or other gear on top. Some vehicles have large heavy duty car top racks capable of hauling lots of goodies. But, if you plan to carry a “combat ready” pontoon...fully assembled and inflated...it’s better to transport them in a pickup, van or trailer.

Most people purchase vehicles to suit lifestyles and family needs. **SERIOUS** flotation fishermen buy a vehicle to accommodate their chosen craft. What if you already have a vehicle and can’t or won’t change it? Well, if you are looking for a new tube or toon you need to think about what will fit in your ride and how you will have to transport it...deflated or ready to rumble.

Even compact cars can haul float tubes when they are fully deflated. And, if you have the right craft, patience and creativity, you can also carry deflated and disassembled pontoons in dinky autos. You might have to use up all the trunk and back seat but you can get ‘er done. Forget your family and fishing buddies.

Impatient fishermen usually like to arrive at their fishing holes all aired up and ready to launch. If you fit that description you might have to make some tradeoffs. Smaller craft can be transported “locked and loaded” in smaller vehicles. Larger craft in the same vehicle may have to be only partially inflated for the ride to and from the water.

Okay, now what do you do with your tube or toon in between trips? Hopefully you have a big garage. That will let you hang it on a wall, put it up in the rafters, hang it horizontally above your vehicles or store it deflated on a shelf. You can also keep it in a “guest room”. Most of us would rather keep our craft comfortable than have guests anyway.

Modern tubes and toons are made from materials that are not going to be damaged by spending a winter outside as long as you keep them covered and protected from direct exposure to sunlight and extreme weather.

In other words, if you want to keep it in an outdoor storage tent or shed you can safely do so. Just be sure to bring your craft into warmer air and let it stabilize before airing it up or bending it while deflated. If the air chambers are stiff from cold they are subject to cracking.

You should exercise precautions when storing your craft outside during the summer too. Keep it protected from direct sun and excessive heat. Also, never store anything with an air bladder fully inflated in the heat of summer...whether inside your garage or in your vehicle to or from a fishing trip. The air inside the bladders can expand enough to explode your ride. Not good.

Be sure to read the chapter on Transportation for additional suggestions for getting your craft to and from the water.

SPECIES, TACKLE AND TECHNIQUES

These three factors all work together to influence your choice of a tube or toon...or both. For example, if you intend to fly fish for trout on remote mountain lakes you will do better with one of the lightweight float tubes designed for backpacking.

Another example might be an angler who wants to fish for bass on larger lakes and wants to cover lots of water. He should probably buy a pontoon upon which he can mount an electric trolling motor and controls.

You can “get by” with only one craft for a wide range of fishing situations. I have fished mostly from a float tubes for over 50 years...as a matter of personal preference. I have tubed both freshwater and saltwater, for many species, with all types of tackle. But, while I have done well with just a float tube there were a lot of occasions when I lusted after a toon...or a boat.

The flip side of that situation is that I know lots of successful anglers that fish only from a toon but often regret that they do not also have a float tube for some waters and some fishing situations. There are times and places where either craft may work better than the other.

To the best of my knowledge there is no law in any state that restricts how many floatation craft you can own...or of what type. If you have the budget and the need then by all means go ahead and buy both a tube and a toon...or more than one of each.

Multi-species anglers who fish with all kinds of tackle, under varying conditions, can easily justify having both kinds of floatation systems. In fact, there will be times and places where you could conceivably use both on the same day.

A good example might be on a multi-species lake with a variety of angling opportunities. You start by fishing the shoreline early using a float tube for quiet presentations while it is still calm. If a breeze comes up, you switch to your toon and use the electric motor or oars to do some trolling...or to make a trip to a protected cove that would be too far to kick with the float tube.

Multi-species, multi-tackle anglers are also likely to have more expansive requirements in the design and construction of their craft. The more tackle they take aboard and the bigger the fish they pursue the larger the craft they should buy and the more storage pockets they will need.

There are fewer needs in size or storage capacity for floatation fishermen who target only one or two species and who do not fish a lot of different waters. Their angling tends to be simpler with less tackle and fewer or smaller pockets needed to hold their stuff. They can usually get by with lighter and more basic designs in either tubes or toons.

For example, fly-flinging troutiers do not have very exotic requirements. They can wave fairy wands from either a tube or a toon. As long as they have a good stripping apron and plenty of pocket space for all their fly boxes, extra lines and other goodies they are good to go.

An increasing number of ardent fly guys are electing pontoons as their preferred casting platforms. You sit a bit higher in a toon and that extra altitude can help both distance and accuracy with a fly rod. Some toons have optional platforms and lean bars for standing.

Those who chase bass or other warm water species from their inflatables have other considerations. First would be the sizes and types of tackle pockets. Spinnerbaits, crankbaits, jerk baits, etc. require larger lure boxes than flies or small jigs. That dictates having a craft with pockets big enough to accommodate your lure suitcases.

Bassers often favor pontoons over tubes for some of the same reasons as fly flingers. You sit higher in a toon. That provides better vision down into the water when sight fishing in shallower water. It also provides more control when flipping or pitching. And, toons generally come with brackets for mounting a trolling motor and a deck upon which to store a big deep cycle battery. Serious bass chasers can't live without their trolling motors.

The type of fish you expect to catch should also influence your choice of craft design and materials. For example, catching spiny-rayed fishes puts your inflated craft at risk for punctures. You should shop for a tube or toon with tougher air bladder materials...like urethane. Thin vinyl air chambers develop pinhole leaks a lot more often with less resistance. You also should look for sturdy cover materials. Many of today's craft have areas covered with protective PVC. Some even have floatation chambers that are rated as puncture proof.

If you plan on launching in salt-water...whether off beaches or in protected bays and backwaters...you will want the best craft you can afford. Besides having plenty of D rings and plenty of floatation you want to be sure that the materials can hold up under the combined factors of sun, sand and salt water. Today's tubes and toons generally feature high quality covers and stitching so they are not prone to premature disintegration. And, as previously mentioned, some of the premier models have bottoms and even some top areas covered in tough PVC. Nevertheless, you should always rinse your craft and tackle in fresh water after every trip to the briny.

DESIGN OPTIONS

Tubes and toons come in a wonderful array of sizes and designs. They might all look the same to the uninitiated but there are many different features and options to choose from.

Float tubes used to be universally round. Now they are mostly open fronted craft but with quite a few potential differences. Some "U-boats" are simply round boats with one side missing. Others are more elongated to provide greater floatation. Then, there are the "V-boats", identifiable by the pointed bow/stern behind the angler.

Additionally there are the "mini-pontoons"...or "pon-tubes"...with two separate air chambers. Some of these are connected by a supportive third air chamber. Others have straps and stabilizer bars. Many tubers are enchanted by the higher floatation of the mini-toons, but quickly become frustrated with the control problems when it gets breezy. A higher ride translates to more wind catching surface and greater difficulty in maintaining position while fishing in a breeze.

Still another "float tube" design is a hybrid between a rubber raft and a float tube. As the description might suggest these are basically enclosed rafts with a portion of the "floor" missing to allow the angler's legs and fins to extend downward into the water. Since they do not offer many recognizable advantages over more traditional designs, and because they are more "spendy", there are not too many of them on the waters.

The V-boats are arguably the best all-around craft for tubers who want greater floatation, higher seating and better handling in a breeze. Most models have either rigid foam or inflated seats to elevate the angler. Sitting higher off the water you stay warmer in cold water and there is less drag when you kick your fins for propulsion. And, if a breeze comes up the pointed end rides into the wind and waves better for easier tracking and control.

Some U-boats and V-boats have small enclosed storage areas behind the angler. These are not usually waterproof but can accommodate a dry bag or plastic container for additional storage of clothing, etc. These work well for taking out extra tackle, food items, camping gear, etc.

Most pontoons look pretty much the same at first glance...two air chambers, a frame and a seat...with oars. But, that is where the similarity ends and differences begin. Some have shorter pontoons with greater width on each air chamber than longer models. Short and squat can provide as much floatation as long and sleek but maneuverability and control will be different under different conditions.

Some pontoons feature dual air chambers on each side for a total of four per craft. Extra air chambers to inflate obviously increase setup and takedown times. On the positive side the quad chambers also increase stability and safety. You have to decide what is most important to you.

Two narrower air chambers on each side, rather than one larger one, lowers the “profile” of the craft and decreases wind resistance. However, having more of the pontoons in contact with the water’s surface increases drag. This slightly reduces propulsion efficiency whether from fins, oars or electric motor.

There is one element of pontoon design that instantly separates toons from tubes. Those are the frames. Tubes are pretty much self-contained. Pontoons have large separate air chambers that need more than a couple of wimpy straps to hold them firmly in place. Toons generally have metal frames and a system of attachment that makes them easy to set up and take down without compromising strength and endurance.

Pontoon frames can be made of several metals. Steel and/or aluminum are the most common in toon frames. Steel is cheaper and heavier. Aluminum is lighter and more expensive.

There are differences in oarlocks and the oars that come with your craft too. Do some research and look them over carefully. Standard rowing systems are suitable for most tooning but you may want to spend a bit more for upgrades or retrofits...if available

Assembly hardware is a biggie. Whatever craft you fall in love with should be simple to put together and take down, especially if you are going to have to transport it disassembled inside your vehicle. Ideally it will have ring pins rather than nuts or bolts that require tools.

Also, check the adjustability of the footrests and seat. These should be easily repositioned... forward or backward...to maximize rowing efficiency and to balance the total weight of your loaded system. Installing a trolling motor and heavy battery will definitely change the balance.

If you plan to use an electric trolling motor you should buy a toon with a mounting bracket built into the frame. You can always retrofit or rig a motor mount but it is better to get a craft with one already installed and balanced for your model.

Most pontoons do have a small platform behind the seat. This is useful for stowing extra gear, but is also commonly used for holding the heavy deep cycle battery needed to power an electric trolling motor. Some models include sturdy platforms along with the motor mounts. Others have wimpy little platforms that will not hold the weight of a heavy battery. Make sure you either get what you want when you buy, or that you are able to make a satisfactory retrofit on the existing frame.

COVERS AND COLORS

Early float tube covers were made of canvas, plastic-coated cloth or plain plastic. Some of my first tube contraptions were fashioned from denim strips and burlap. Today, most commercial covers are assembled from high denier nylon. The higher the “denier”, the tougher the cover. As previously mentioned, some of the better quality craft include PVC coatings on the bottom or other strategic points to reduce wear and to increase puncture protection.

Tubes and toons are available in a wide variety of colors. You can choose from solids or combinations of red, blue, green, brown, black, purple, yellow...and some really wild hot colors too. There are even camouflage prints for those who are also hunters ...or who just want to sneak up on the fish. Lots of floatation folks like to “cast and blast”.

One color that is good to have on your craft is “safety orange”. Several models, from several manufacturers, include patches of this hot color incorporated into the covers. This makes anglers more easily seen by boaters, water skiers and others. Some states and many waters actually require that floatation anglers display a specific amount of the orange on their craft. Unfortunately, it sometimes seems to act as a magnet for power squadron bozos who delight in buzzing float tubes.

Some potential floatation fishermen express concern that bright colors might spook fish. In reality, that does not seem to happen. Experiments have been conducted amongst groups of tubers...some with brightly colored craft...others with darker colors. No significant affect on the quality of fishing has ever been attributed to cover colors. Of course, if you are already a lousy fisherman, cover color is not going to make any difference. But, good fishermen can usually do well even when forced to fish under handicaps.

ZIPPERS, SEAMS

The quality of a floatation craft is only as good as the components and methods used to put them all together. You should always look for the best quality zippers and stitching. High denier nylon covers should have multiple rows of stitching with nylon thread. Nylon resists sun damage and rot. Some other threads don't.

Over time, even good nylon stitching can degrade. Sun, ozone, fluctuations in heat and cold and the affects of soaking and drying can weaken seam integrity. Add in some fraying from dragging your craft on rough surfaces and you are at risk for seam failure. It's bad enough to have a seam rip out as you are airing up your craft before a trip. It is worse when it happens on the water. Not only will it ruin your fishing but it could result in equipment loss...or worse.

The zippers that close up the cover and hold in the air chambers are something we usually take for granted and hope for the best. The wrong time to find out that you have a bad zipper is when it suddenly fails...or won't close properly when you are trying to get ready to go fishing.

We need to pay attention to all of the zippers that secure the various pockets and other compartments on our craft as well. Get good zippers and then don't abuse them by trying to force them closed when you have the pockets overloaded. Compartments that won't close can result in lost tackle and accessories that were stored in them.

Fortunately, most tubes and toons on the market today have good zippers as part of their standard construction. The lower the price the more likely that zipper quality will be an area on which the manufacturer has cut corners to keep the price down. Believe me, it is better to spend a few dollars more to get a craft with good sturdy zippers.

Unfortunately, there is no set of guidelines for evaluating zippers before you buy. You just have to look at them, work them a few times and watch out for lightweight nylon zippers that can fail easily under repeated stress. Once a flimsy nylon zipper has failed it weakens and will seldom hold well ever again. Metal zippers are better but there are some heavy duty synthetic ones.

POCKETS

There's an old saying: “You can never be too rich or too thin.” Tubers and tooners could just as well say “There's no such thing as too much pocket space.” It seems that no matter how big the pockets, or how many you have, there is never enough storage to stash all your stuff.

The size, shape and utility of the pockets can be more important than the total volume. Some craft are designed for fly fishermen...with pockets only large enough to hold a few small fly boxes and the miscellaneous knickknacks used by fly flingers. These small compartments frustrate tubers and tooners who need to carry larger lure boxes.

Some pocket designs defy logic and were not likely designed by real fishermen. For example, there are tubes with large pockets that are divided up into multiple small pockets with limited use. These partition pockets cannot hold much and they actually create the potential for misplacing something you need but can't find. Small pockets are for vests...not tubes and toons.

Then there are the craft with large tackle pockets that can comfortably hold several full lure boxes as well as a multitude of other essentials. The challenge here is to avoid carrying too much tackle. Tackle overload adds both bulk and weight making it more difficult to carry your craft between vehicle and launch site.

Another problem with carrying too much gear is "overflow". With a lot of gear on board the tendency is to get sloppy. Unstowed boxes can slip overboard when you are rocked by waves, or in the excitement of landing a fish, or from a careless bump with an elbow.

Tackle pockets should be strategically placed and at a comfortable height. Float tubers usually sit lower in their craft. The pockets on either side double as arm rests. They should be large enough to hold plenty of gear but not so high that they force the angler to fish with arms in awkward positions. The top surfaces should also be smooth so that tubers fishing with bare forearms can rest them on the tops of the pockets without irritation or discomfort.

Pontoon anglers sit up higher than tubers. They need to be able to easily reach their pockets without straining their backs or falling overboard. With the larger surface area on most pontoons, it is possible to add pockets with the creative use of some Velcro and some small storage bags.

Hopefully, you get a craft that has "dry storage"...waterproof pockets into which you can stuff extra layers of clothing or other items you wish to keep dry. If you don't have such pockets, but have either a storage deck or open area behind the seat you can improvise. Go to a surplus store or good outdoor outfitter and buy a "dry bag" like those used by river runners. These can be sealed against waves and splashes and stowed wherever you can find the space. Of course, you can simply stuff your stuff into a plastic bag and put it all in a pocket. However, a flimsy plastic bag may not remain waterproof very long.

SEATS AND BACKRESTS

In the olden days there was a malady I affectionately termed "crotch cramps". It was caused by poorly adjusted seats in the old donut style tubes. All round tubes have some variation of the adjustable seat and crotch strap. Maybe that's one reason why fewer anglers are buying them.

Open front tubes do not have crotch straps. Theoretically, it is possible for tubers to slip out the front of their craft if they are unlucky and/or their seats are not properly adjusted. It does not happen frequently enough to be considered a problem but in buying a tube you should pay attention to seat construction.

Some "modern" float tubes still have seating designs that have the angler sitting below the water line. That includes many of the open front craft. Below water seating increases drag during propulsion but also slows wind drift. It also makes casting with a fly rod more laborious and reduces visibility down into the water. Furthermore, it requires more attention to dressing properly in cold conditions since more of your lower body is in the water.

There are an increasing number of designs that provide higher seating, especially in better quality craft. This elevated seating is accomplished in several ways. First is by adjustable seat straps to raise or lower the seat between the two sides of the craft. Second is through use of rigid foam seats. These are foam inserts that slide into special pockets for both the bottom and backrest. The third high seating option is the inflatable seat. These are only found in a few of the “high end” float tubes. They add significantly to the price on a similar model with foam seats.

Most tubers prefer rigid foam seats for several reasons. First, they are less costly than inflated seats. Second is the additional safety factor. They provide natural extra floatation in the event of a sudden disastrous deflation of your air chamber(s). They also do not compress inward, helping keep the two sides of your craft from squeezing in on you. You risk both safety and stability if an inflatable seat loses air.

One of the most important parts of a tuber’s seat is the backrest. This is an area of great diversity in design and function. Some backrests are integral parts of the tube. In other cases they are either plain nylon fabric panels or the aforementioned rigid foam or inflated cushions.

There are two elements of tubing backrests that can contribute to discomfort or back problems. First is the height and rigidity of the backrest. Second is the adjustment of the straps. A back rest that does not support the full length of your back, or which is improperly adjusted for your size and weight, can leave you with a real pain in the back.

Pontoons come with several different kinds of seats too. Toons often have hard seats, bolted to the frame, with adjustability to allow proper positioning for rowing. Some “economy” models have simple frame and fabric seats. There are aftermarket accessory seats that you can buy to retrofit or upgrade your factory seats.

Many tooners prefer having padded fold down seats. It is even better if they have swivel bases. These are especially nice if you must turn around to operate a rear mounted electric motor or reach for something on the platform behind the seat.

Whether you buy a tube or toon (or both), the seat and backrest should be a significant part of your evaluation process. You will spend a lot of time out on the water during a full day of fishing. Good comfortable seating can add more enjoyment to your day. Uncomfortable seats can ruin your trip before you even get well started. See the chapter on Pimping for modification ideas.

ATTACHMENT POINTS...D-RINGS, SNAPS, VELCRO STRIPS, ETC.

Tubers and tooners are seldom satisfied with an uncluttered craft. No matter how nice their new ride, they gotta mess with it. It starts by adding nets...and then goes to fish baskets...and then to rod holders...and ultimately to sonar and all kinds of other add-on goodies.

In the “olden days” if you wanted to add anything to your basic float tube you had to lash it down...with cord, strapping, etc. Thankfully, modern craft usually include a sufficient number of D-rings, straps, Velcro strips and other standard provisions for securing your add-ons and extras.

The first D-rings to appear on tubes were for securing the corners of stripping aprons. Later models included more D rings for hanging stuff off the sides of the tubes. Tubers pleaded for more D rings and manufacturers responded. Most craft today have a veritable plethora of the handy hangers. By rigging your add-ons with snaps and clips you can take advantage of the D rings to quickly set up or dismantle your tricked out ride.

Velcro strips were originally provided for the benefit of fly flingers who wanted to secure their long rods across their craft while launching, beaching and relocating. For non fly-guys these Velcro strips also serve for anchoring down cords and straps for rod holders and sonar display mounts. Velcro is available in most fabric shops and hobby & craft outlets and is easily installed. Some creative tubers and tooners attach Velcro strips and patches to facilitate quick on and off for adding pockets or other frivolities.

APRONS

Aprons have long been included on float tubes to provide a line holding platform for fly fishermen. Fly flingers need something upon which to coil fly line while stripping in after a cast or to hold shooting line for long casts. If you are of the fly fishing persuasion you should shop for a craft with a well-designed apron.

Aprons are useful for non fly flingers too. They serve as work surfaces...upon which to set tackle while rerigging. Your apron can be a lifesaver when it becomes a “catch tray” while working on reels or other malfunctioning gear. They will save the day if you drop a vital part, a favorite lure or your glasses. They are not a cure for klutziness, but they do reduce your losses.

Aprons are also useful for safely controlling fish after you bring them aboard. Some have rulers printed along one edge for quick measurement. You can bring in a fish, pin it down on the apron, remove the hook, measure it and then either release it or drop it into your live bag.

Almost all float tubes still come equipped with aprons. Some are large and well designed. Others are wimpy wisps of mesh that do little more than get in the way and are more trouble than they are worth. If you need a good apron for fly fishing you either need to buy a tube with a good one as standard issue or plan to make your own retrofit after purchase. Pictures and suggestions for mods and retrofitting aprons will be included in the chapter on “Pimping”.

Because pontoons feature higher seating aprons are more difficult to rig on them. There are only a few toons that offer over-the-lap aprons. If they come with aprons at all they are either on the sides or directly under your legs. If they are properly placed they still function to hold line or to catch dropped gear. But most tooners who were former tubers tend to miss the utility of float tube aprons. If you really need something into which you can strip line while fishing from a toon consider carrying a bucket or plastic storage container...as a stripping basket.

AIR CHAMBERS & VALVES

The original “donut dinghies” had one air chamber. They were round because they were simply truck tire inner tubes with covers. Tire tubes are made of heavy black rubber. That rubber is bulky and heavy but more resistant to minor punctures from stickers and fin spines than thin vinyl or urethane bladders.

Today’s flotation craft come in a variety of shapes and offer a number of different types of air chambers and valve options. Some float tubes still have only one air chamber even if they are one of the open front models. Others feature two or even three air chambers.

There are arguments both for and against multiple air chambers. Obviously, it is more bothersome having to maintain air pressure in more than one air chamber. However, having more than one provides an extra measure of safety in the event of a leaky valve or a puncture. It is better to limp back to shore, sagging on one side, than to sink your whole rig.

The air bladders in today’s tubes and toons can be made from several different materials. The old black butyl rubber is rare even in the round tubes currently available. Most will be either vinyl or urethane. Urethane is more expensive but it is also tougher and less prone to either pinhole leaks or seam failure.

Some modern craft feature heavy gauge PVC air chambers that are very tough. Others have self-sealing air chambers that will withstand incredible abuse...either from fish or from the environment. If you are a river runner, or plan to launch and beach through heavy water or snaggy shoreline, you should look for tougher covers and air chambers.

As with air chambers, there are a lot of different types of air valves. The type and size of the valves on your system can make a big difference in maintenance, efficiency and in your own sanity.

Truck tire inner tubes have a standard tire valve. Most people are familiar with them but they are becoming increasingly rare. They require a compressor or tire pump to fill and standard tube patching kit for repairs. All that stuff is almost obsolete.

Modern air chambers of vinyl and urethane have a number of different air valve options. Some can be inflated with lungpower. Others require special pumps, connections and fittings. Be sure you acquire the necessary means of inflating your new craft and practice doing so before you hit the water for the first time.

Most toons and tubes can be quickly inflated with one of the two-way hand pumps available in sports outlets or wherever floatation craft are sold. These usually come with several different connectors to accommodate the standard size valve openings. However, some tubes or toons have unique designs that require special adaptors. If you buy such a craft the adaptors are usually provided but it is not a bad idea to purchase an extra and keep it where it is easily available (and remembered). It is also a good idea to buy a repair kit with any special tools necessary for removing valves and air chambers for repairs.

See the chapter on Care, Repairs & Modifications for the various maintenance items in your floatation system.