



# TUGS BUILT HERE

Take a revealing  
walk through the  
Nordic Tugs factory

STORY AND PHOTOS  
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Does the state of a boat manufacturer's factory give any indication of the quality of the vessels it produces?

If that boat builder is the successful Nordic Tugs, Inc., it most certainly does. Since its inception in 1980 Nordic has continuously expanded the size of its product line — its plants have been expanded, added to, sectionally rebuilt and generally “modified” in an attempt to keep up with demand for the tug-style “fast trawlers” Nordic has become known for.

With this as a background, I expected my tour of the Nordic Tugs plant in Burlington, Washington, would show a “pieced together” physical plant, with all of the problems such a facility invariably has, including small closed spaces, bad lighting and ventilation and generally cramped and cluttered working stations. My expectations were wrong.

### Clean Operation

Despite the sprawling nature of the plant, it was the best of more than 50 fiberglass plants I have visited. While the pungent odor of glass and resin

was noticeable, it was barely so compared to other plants I've visited. The ventilation system was so good that in most areas of the plant I could smell fresh air. The usual haze caused by handling fiberglass was totally absent, even at cutting tables.

Everyone in the production areas, even visitors, were required to wear safety glasses, complete with eye side protection. Even visitors with prescription safety lens glasses were required to use goggles that fit comfortably over their glasses.

The lighting in all areas of the plant was up to standard, and I never noticed a burned-out lightbulb or tube. Work lights inside boats at various stages of completion were bright and plentiful. I didn't notice anyone working with a flashlight (not an uncommon practice in many plants) when working around engines, tanks or control panels.

The Nordic plant, similar to many other boat production plants, has a series of raised platforms at the stern where various interior components are fitted. In many facilities these platforms are made of wood and accessed

**A clean and safe environment allows workers at Nordic Tugs to concentrate on quality craftsmanship. The company's philosophy is that workers who take pride in their work build better boats, and that is certainly good news if you are interested in owning one of these “fast trawlers.”**

by wooden stairways or even ladders. At the Nordic plant most of these platforms are made of steel with an open-grate walk plate. This provides good safe footing for workers. However, as with most open-grate flooring, dirt from shoes falls through to the floor below. This leads to constant airborne dust.

Nordic has solved this problem with elegant simplicity. A layer of industrial cardboard is laid on top of the grate. This layer fixes itself to the grate as soon as it is walked on and stops dirt from falling to the floor below. When the cardboard starts to wear through, it, and all the dirt trapped on it, is rolled up and disposed of.

The cardboard protection process, combined with a five-person maintenance and cleaning team, helps keep the production plant floors clean —

this, in conjunction with excellent ventilation, keeps airborne dust at bay.

## Safety First

Steps up to the platforms are firmly fixed and complete with handrails. In some other factories the boat being worked on is accessed from the work platform over a plank or two cobbled together. At the Nordic plant access between the work platform and each boat is via a thick plywood walkway cut to the exact length required. Each piece of ply has a plank affixed along each side, creating a safety lip so anyone moving along the walkway can “feel” the edge of the walkway and not accidentally step or slip off. Nordic also positions the boats under construction very close to the work platform so access to and from the vessel is quick, safe and easy. The walkway edges are painted a caution yellow and “CAUTION” in black paint is stenciled on the walkway itself.

It is clear that Nordic Tugs takes worker safety seriously. Signs remind all in the plant that hard hats and safety glasses are required. Whenever a boat being worked on has an open hatch, a sign is affixed to the entryway to the boat warning that there are open hatches.

Whenever overhead cranes are in use, safety cones and ribbons are laid out on the floor under the lift to warn other workers, or visitors, of the possible danger overhead.

Nordic Tugs management has, over the years, obviously paid serious attention to plant conditions, recognizing that the ability of tradesmen to work in good conditions and safe, clean surroundings leads to better quality boats. Workers who produce a quality product take pride in their work, and that leads to even better quality and so on. Nordic Tug buyers get the benefit, and they tell their boat-buying friends. This commitment to quality and safety is one of the cornerstones of

Nordic Tugs’ success.

## Accelerated Growth

The fact that Nordic has been able to maintain, improve and grow its various plants over the years is even more amazing when one looks at the history of the builder. It’s one thing to keep a production facility in relatively good order when producing a couple of boats a year, but quite another thing to do so when the builder produces 15 times that many.

The first Nordic Tug, designed by Seattle’s late Lynn Senour, was a 26-footer that was introduced at the 1980 Seattle Boat Show. Stylistically she was a modern update of tugs of the 1930s. She boasted good fuel economy with 13 nautical miles per gallon of diesel at 6.5 knots — and good fuel economy was an important feature in the late 1970s.

The design was so successful at the show that Nordic took one order every three hours. It had orders for 54 by the time the show ended. They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and two competitors sprouted up to compete with Nordic Tugs by the time the 1981 Seattle show rolled around.

In fact in 1982, which was a “downtime” in the recreational boating industry, the Northwest Marine Trades Association cited Nordic Tug as “... one of the biggest

success stories of a largely depressed pleasure boat construction scene.”

In 1985, the company introduced a 32-footer, but she was more than simply a larger version of the 26. She maintained the traditional Nordic Tug look above the waterline, but the underwater profile allowed the vessel to top out at 16 knots.

As the popularity of Nordic’s boats continued to grow, the company moved its plant and offices to Burlington in upper Washington and doubled its plant size. As the economy picked up and demand continued to build, the company, in 1998, was once again forced to move to a larger facility (also in Burlington), this time with a fivefold increasing in its production capacity. During that year Nordic also ceased production of the 26-footer, because the demand for its larger vessels had strengthened dramatically.

## More Room for Bigger Boats

As of this writing, Nordic is building a new 30,000-square-foot build-



# The Nordic Tug Lineup

NORDIC TUGS 32



NORDIC TUGS 37



NORDIC TUGS 52



Nordic Tugs started out in 1980 with a single 26-footer. The company has experienced a rapid acceleration in growth and now builds four models, the 32, 37, 42 and 52. Something about the Nordic Tugs' polished workboat style and plush interiors obviously resonates with boaters, not to mention these boats can handle Mother Nature's worst and have the range to make extended voyages.

Neil Rabinowitz photos



At the time of our tour there were 15 Nordic Tugs in production, and the company is adding room for more (and larger) boats. In addition to adding 7,500 square feet to its lamination shop, the company is building a new 30,000-square-foot building at its location in Burlington, Washington.

ing on its existing property and is planning to add another 7,500 square feet to its lamination shop. When it first moved to Burlington it employed 25 production tradesmen. Nordic now employs 150, and there were 110 on shift at the time of our tour. A total of 15 Nordic Tugs were under construction at that time. Except for stainless railings, Nordic produces all required hull, deck and cabin parts in-house.

"The problem with our current building is that we don't have the height in our existing plant to build out larger boats," said Nordic Vice President of Production Paul Johnson.

"We have to take our larger hulls outside to fit the upper works and then move them back inside for finishing. The new building will make the operation much more efficient."

Nordic, like many other businesses these days, finds it difficult to get experienced new employees, so it takes steps to make sure it retains the employees it has.

"We pay premium wages, have a good benefit plan, including 401K matching and a four-day workweek," Johnson said. "Our average employee has been with Nordic for five years."

"We also try to make sure that employees can take the time they need

to do a good job," Johnson said. "This leads to a high level of job satisfaction and good quality." Every Nordic Tug is sea trialed, and when the sea trial team puts a new vessel through her paces on the water a production employee gets a chance to go along for the ride.

## On the Horizon

Nordic feels that post-delivery support has been a major factor in keeping new boat owners happy. The company has one person dedicated to after-sales service, and that person can call upon any other employee to help solve virtually any problem a Nordic Tug owner might run into.

Nordic's main markets have been the Pacific Northwest and the Northeastern U.S., said Nordic Sales Manager Bob Shamek. "We've not yet tapped the overseas market, and we feel that Europe will become a good market for our product."

Fuel efficiency at displacement speeds has always been high on Nordic's list of "must produce" features, and this fact has led to the first tunnel-hull 32-footer, now under construction in the plant. Normally, tunnel hulls are built to allow a reduced vessel draft for skippers who want to cruise in shallower waters. In Nordic's case, however, it wants to be able to increase prop diameter to create more efficiency. If the shaft down angle is also reduced, additional efficiency will be added.

Sea Magazine will be among the first to test this new hull when it splashes down. 🍀