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RIVIERA'S SPARKLING 6800SY BOAT TRAILER GUIDE TALE OF TWO TINNIES
FISHING WITH KIDS TOURING THE CENTRAL COAST HONDA'S HOT V8 350

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CARING FOR GELCOAT

Fresh gelcoat on a fibreglass boat not only looks good, it's also a protective layer between the laminate and the elements.

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Gelcoat is a coloured layer of resin that provides a smooth, glossy finish on the hull and exterior of a fibreglass boat. When it's newly prepared or freshly polished or waxed, gelcoat looks and feels as smooth as glass.

Gelcoat might look like it's impervious to staining or deterioration, but it's actually very porous and can absorb contaminants and stains quickly.

Over time, unprotected gelcoat will oxidise, taking on a faded appearance and becoming 'chalky'. Oxidation causes the surface to become porous, creating a dull surface that's generally harder to clean and maintain.

Deteriorated gelcoat can be restored to a high standard with relatively simple, albeit laborious processes using readily available products, as long as it's not completely worn through.

CARING FOR GELCOAT

First item on the gelcoat care to-do list is washing – it's the easiest maintenance task and probably one of the most important.

After each use or whenever possible, rinse saltwater and sand from the boat with a hose before using detergent or wiping over the surface. Sand and salt are abrasive, so rinsing them away will help avoid scraping the grains across surfaces and scratching them.

After rinsing, wash the vessel down with a suitable boat wash – use a biodegradable product that doesn't strip wax from the surface and is safe to use on all finishes.

After washing and between wax applications, it can be beneficial to use a spray wax to help keep gelcoat looking pristine, or try a boat wash and wax product.

Use boat-specific cleaning aids such as soft boat brushes, microfibre or cotton mops and washing pads. Scourers, brooms or brushes with hard bristles can scratch or abrade the gelcoat surface, and harsh chemicals and abrasive cleaners will damage the surface and can remove protective coatings, so avoid using them.

High-pressure washers tend to strip away wax and protective coatings and can be detrimental to other materials or finishes such as teak, foam-based decking, decals and signwriting.

For moored boats and those stored out in the elements, it's good practice to wash them in two-week intervals as contaminants such as bird droppings, dust and salt mist will accumulate on your boat's exterior. Properly washing this away and drying the boat will help maintain the gelcoat's condition and your boat's

Repairs to gelcoat are often less costly than boat owners expect

Maintaining your boat's gelcoat in good condition is a sound investment

appearance for longer, with less effort and cost in the long run.

While washing the boat, you're more likely to notice damage to the gelcoat and fibreglass, and can repair it early (or get it repaired) while it's still cosmetic and yet to become a bigger problem.

STUBBORN STAINS

Boat soap and elbow grease might not be enough to remove stubborn stains, whether organic or mineral in nature, as they're usually set a bit deeper in the gelcoat – especially if the gelcoat is aged and porous.

Organic stains refer to residue and discolouration from nature-based deposits such as plant matter, water, bird droppings, and food or beverage spills.

Mineral stains include rust spots, oil, exhaust, black soot and other industrial-based pollution.

To remove stubborn stains, you'll need stain removers suitable for gelcoat that are specific to the type of stain. These are generally biodegradable liquid or gel products that work chemically with little or no scrubbing. If a small area is affected, a light polishing compound will often remove the stain.

Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions to ensure a good result, and always use appropriate safety measures (you'll find these on the instructions too).

CUT AND POLISH

Dull or oxidised gelcoat can be polished to restore its shine. Very lightly deteriorated gelcoat may only require light polishing followed by waxing.

If it's more deteriorated, a two-stage cut (heavy, then fine) before waxing might be needed, while badly deteriorated surfaces may need wet sanding, two-stage cutting and waxing.

Commonly called 'cutting compounds', these abrasive polishes are available in varying grades. It's advisable to test them on a small area to assess the results, beginning with the least abrasive product. This is important because each time the surface is polished or compounded, a small amount of gelcoat is removed.

This task can be performed by hand, but it's a laborious process so you might want to consider using an electric circular buffer with compounding and buffing pads, which might also give you a better result.

If the gelcoat is already badly deteriorated, it's worth consulting a professional boat detailing business as the wrong techniques or products could further damage it.

At some point, deteriorated gelcoat can't be restored to a pristine condition – likewise, there's a limit to how many times a heavy cutting or polishing process can be performed because it removes a small amount of gelcoat each time.

WAXING

The next step is to seal and protect the gelcoat with wax. This will help maintain the colour, shine and integrity of the finish while also sealing out oxygen to prevent oxidation.

In the harsh Australian climate, it's a good idea to use boat wax with UV inhibitors to help protect against sun damage.

Regular waxing also makes cleaning easier as it's harder for grime and dirt to stick to waxed surfaces. Interior surfaces of fibreglass boats will also benefit from waxing to help with upkeep.

As a guide, moored boats and boats stored out in the open should be waxed every three months on the topsides (above the gunwale) and in six-month intervals on the hull sides – this will vary depending on where you keep your boat and the products you use.

if damage exposes the core material, water absorption can be an issue

Top: Boats kept outdoors should ideally be washed fortnightly and polished every three months.

Right: Gelcoat chips like this are only a cosmetic repair.

Top: Cracked gelcoat around this fitting has exposed the fibreglass, which needs attention to avoid further damage and restore its structural integrity.

Above left: With deep gouges, a laminate and gelcoat repair may be required.

Left: Glossy gelcoat on a new hull fresh from the mould.

A good indicator that it's time to reapply wax is when water stops 'beading' or forming droplets as it runs off the surface.

GELCOAT REPAIRS

Repairs to gelcoat are often less costly than boat owners expect, and not all damage leads to issues with the fibreglass laminate underneath.

Right: With gelcoat cracking like this, you may need to repair the laminate first.

if the fibreglass underneath hasn't been damaged, repairs to gelcoat are generally cosmetic

A question we're frequently asked is whether a scrape or non-structural damage in the gelcoat that exposes the laminate will lead to water absorption. If the damage is not underwater and it's exposing just resin or laminate, quite possibly not. However if the damage exposes the core material then it's very likely that water absorption can be an issue and the damage should be assessed and repaired as soon as possible.

Shallow gouges: if the gelcoat's colour is visible at the bottom of the scratch, it's likely the repair is just a cosmetic requirement.

Deep gouges: if the damage goes into the laminate behind the gelcoat, you'll need to establish whether it has reduced the strength of the laminate. A marine repair professional can advise whether a gelcoat repair is required, or laminate plus gelcoat repair.

Cracks: if hairline cracks in the gelcoat are only faintly visible and are small in number, it's less likely to be a structural issue, but this depends on how many cracks and where they're located. If in doubt, consult a professional. If cracks expose the fibreglass underneath, or if the surface is distorted, broken or fibres are showing, it's likely that laminate repair is required followed by new gelcoat. In this case, it's best to get it repaired by a professional.

Maintaining your boat's gelcoat in good condition is a sound investment and well worth the effort – not only will your pride and joy look great, but you'll preserve its market value too. CM

GELCOAT REPAIR

From top to bottom:

Gelcoat damage to a cruiser's starboard side, including an old poor-quality repair.

First, the cracks, scratches and holes are prepared for repair, which includes cleaning the area and feathering the edges. Then they're filled with the appropriate filler – for very small or shallow repairs, this may be gelcoat. The repair is then sanded, or 'faired', until it's flat and smooth.

New colour-matched gelcoat is then applied, usually by spraying. Once it has cured, the gelcoat is sanded with progressively smoother grades of sandpaper or with wet and dry sanding.

Finally, the sanded surface is polished or buffed to a gloss finish.