Many builders are offering boats with features that make them the waterborne equivalent of the SUV that’s in your driveway—rugged, go anywhere and able to fill multiple roles. Where the SUV may be a people hauler one day, small delivery vehicle the next and a way to get to the mountains on another, today’s boats are being asked to provide room for the family to get out on the water, pull toys, tubes and skiers and drag race the other guys as well. All this while providing a comfortable and roomy ride with a certain civility.

To help those of you considering getting your first boat, or for those considering an upgrade, here’s a list of some of the features you’ll see around the boat shows on many of the best-selling models. Not all boats will have all of these features, nor will all owners need all of them, but adding some of these features may expand how you use your boat.

1. SWIM PLATFORM

A swim platform is possibly the most important element of the watersports equation. It creates a staging area separate from the cockpit where you can strap on your skis or wakeboard, and it serves as a place where you can reboard and towel off. Many of today’s new boats have integrated swim platforms that are actually part of the mold and give the boat a cleaner look than extended platforms that are bolted on.

While bolt-on extended swim plat-
forms don’t have quite as clean a look, they more than get the job done. Some manufacturers are building their standard boats with a small integrated platform usually called a swim step, and offering the larger (2 feet or more) add-on extended platform as an option.

Besides the advantage of more room to get ready, these platforms extend over the drive and prop, which greatly decreases the likelihood of a swimmer banging his or her feet or shins on the prop or drive. These platforms also provide a place to secure inflated towables for transport. 

2. WALK-THROUGH TRANSMON

This is one of the newest design trends on sportboats, and it’s one we like. Many boats are now offering some sort of easier access to and from the transom to the cockpit. Some builders use a dedicated walkway with a transom door, while others use removable cushions or other dividers that fill in the passageway when not in use, but make getting to the transom platform much easier. We even saw one builder hinge the walk-through section of the cushion so it could be used as a backrest on the sun lounge portion for sitting up while sunbathing. 

WAKE TOWER

3. FLEXIBLE SEATING OPTIONS

That SUV analogy is a good one, as many boats are doing double and triple duty. The old days usually meant back-to-back seats port and starboard, a U-shaped bench forward in the open bow and jump seats on either side of the engine box.

Today’s builders are offering a greater variety of standard and optional seating than ever before. Sport seating has become a standard option offered by almost all builders, replacing the fold-down back-to-back seats with buckets, and covering the engine with a large sunpad and a bench seat forward.

This makes it easier for the spotter to turn and face aft to watch skiers, boarders and tubers, as well as allowing everyone to face into the center of the boat for conversation when at the dock or adrift. Add a small table and some munchies and

THE DIFFERENCE A SPECIALTY BOAT MAKES

SO YOU KNOW WHAT MAKES A SPORTBOAT, but you want to take it to the next level and really focus on specific watersports. What separates an average sportboat from a dedicated watersports machine? 

Engines: Dedicated wakeboard and ski boats use inboard power and V-drive power. Both rely on a propeller and a rudder and both offer superior tracking. The forward engine hump of an inboard does compromise cockpit space, but it’s a fair tradeoff for clean slalom wakes. V-drives are preferred by the wake board crowd because the engine is placed in the rear, which helps push the stern down and plow out bigger wakes. 

Ballast: Ballast tanks are simply water tanks strategically placed in the boat to change its weight and center for gravity. The purpose is to affect the wake to give the right shape for different watersports. While skiers want a relatively flat and minimal wake, wakeboarders want more aggressive wakes to be able to launch off. 

Hull Shape: Dedicated ski boats have hull shapes designed to give specific wake profiles. Ski boats minimize the wake at higher speed for clean slalom sets while wakeboard boats cleave through the water at slower speeds to push up a crisp wake with the right shape and lip. 

Props: Four blade props are a common feature on watersports boats. These props give up some top-end speed to take advantage of a four blade’s tendency to improve acceleration and mid-range performance and give extra lift at the stern. 

Cruise Control: With the advent of computer control on marine engines it’s now possible to eliminate the traditional throttle cable and have control of the engine via electronics. This gives you the ability to set an engine rpm and have the computer adjust fuel flow to maintain a specific speed regardless of wind, current or other forces exerted on the boat - and consistent speed means consistent wake.
beverages, and it’s a great place to spend an evening after skiing all day.

As sportboats have gotten larger, cockpits have gotten roomier, allowing more variety in layout. L- and U-Shaped lounges are becoming common, as well as small cabinets for refrigerators, sinks, and other comfort items. Seats themselves have even become more flexible, as they convert with transformer-like simplicity from forward facing to aft facing to loungers with just the adjustment of a cushion.

4. POP-UP HARDWARE

Anyone wanting to avoid snagging a towrope will like pop-up cleats and running lights. They may be a little “Gee Whiz,” but if you’ve ever snagged anything on a cleat (like a PFD strap or wetsuit sleeve), then you’ll like the clean deck and sides that these can give.

While the coolest cleats feature a spring-loaded button to extend the cleat itself, the ones you pull out manually are just as functional.

5. WICKED TUNES

Having a stereo aboard is nothing new, but as much as anything else the wakeboard movement has inspired builders to offer more watts, better speakers and more versatility.

CD changers, subwoofers, tower speakers, transom remotes, booster amps, PA systems, satellite radio and MP3 compatibility are regularly found on the “options” list on many of today’s boats, and some builders looking to make inroads with the young watersports crowd are offering many of these features as standard equipment.

6. TRANSOM SHOWER

Rinsing off at the end of a hard salt-water session can be damn nice. Many boats have pull-out shower nozzles with a few gallons of fresh water to rinse off, which you’ll find is plenty when you need it. Others offer raw-water showers that pull water from the lake (or bay or ocean), which can be useful as well. Some even scavenge heat from the engine so you can take a warm shower.

7. TOWERS OF POWER

You’ll be amazed at the number of manufacturers offering towers at the boat show this year (what will be more unusual is a builder that doesn’t offer one).

Wakeboarding has made them so popular that some people want them for the aggressive look they offer as much as for the ability to hitch the towrope up higher. Nothing else says that you take your water sports seriously like a huge welded aluminum tower bolted to your boat. Aside from allowing boarders to get more air, the tower gives you a place to mount board racks, speakers, lights and even video equipment to record your sessions.

Aftermarket companies are now becoming a source for add-on towers and are offering those with older boats an economical way to get a tower.
You might feel nice and cool while carving a wedge behind the boat, but the sun doesn’t discriminate. After a long pull behind the boat it’s good to be able to retreat to the shade, dry off and put on some fresh sunscreen. Not to mention it makes things more comfortable for those past tourists who loaf around the boat eating all the snacks while the rest of you take turns trying to improve your skills at the end of the rope.

Wakeboards, skis, PFDs and other gear are bulky and take up a lot of room. In-deck ski lockers are great, and the better ones keep your gear out of any bilge water. Some are even vented to prevent mold and mildew from building up.

Storage that’s in the side of the boat and under the seats is nice as well. Keeping fenders, line and water toys put away means more legroom for passengers and fewer trip hazards for added safety.

Some new boats even have trunks just forward of the swim platform that allow you to keep all your gear back at the business end of the boat.

Did everyone go to the bathroom before we left? Yeah, but that was seven hours ago. A small enclosed head makes everyone more comfortable, and more important, prevents you from being forced back to shore for a potty run. There’s nothing worse than cutting a session short because someone has “to go.” And if you’re at a busy lake it can take a long time to find a place to dock, not to mention long lines at the heads ashore.

You know how it goes; put Dad on the tube behind the boat and then do your best to shake him loose. This is when anybody else in the boat besides the driver will be thankful for well-placed grab handles. And it goes without saying how important grab handles are when it’s time to pack it in and make the trek across the wind-whipped lake to the launch ramp.

In addition, you should have plenty of grabrails at the swim ladder to assist in getting back into the boat.

Wakeboarding, waterskiing and tubing take energy–sometimes lots of it. You need water and nourishment, the more the better. Most boats offer either one or two integrated coolers with drains (sometimes they’re even insulated), or they offer a dedicated storage area for a portable cooler, which prevents you from having to take up limited deck room with a cooler.

The driver should always be alert and on the lookout for any obstacle or danger, even more so when he or she has a living, breathing human on the end of the rope. A 40- or 50-foot line means the danger zone can be as much as 50 feet to either side of the boat, and a good bolster seat helps give the driver and maybe even a passenger a better view.

After a hard session behind the boat you might not be moving quite as easily as before, which could make scampering over the bow onto shore less than comfortable–unless you have a bow ladder, that is. If you like putting the front of the boat on the beach, a ladder on the bow to give easy access to the sand and shore is really nice.

A lot of late model boats get traded in because the boat won’t pull the big guy out of the water or won’t pull a tuber with two or more people on it. Usually getting the next size larger engine will solve the problem. So if you’re buying your first boat, consider more power.

Adding a larger engine later is prohibitively expensive. While the next size engine may only add a mile or two an hour to the top speed, the larger engine will usually produce more torque, and it’s this grunt force that pulls skiers up and gives improved holeshot.

Watersports are a huge part of the boating experience, and these features will go a long way in allowing you to get more out of every trip to the lake. If you can honestly say you won’t need one of those features, then we say leave it out and save some money. But if you think there is any possibility you might need one of them, we rely on the old cliché: better safe than sorry, way better.