

Sept 19 2019 Cruisers Forum Compost Head

I have a single-head boat that my wife and I plan to take on an open-ended cruise from PNW to Florida. Have done a ton of Internet research but hoping for direct feedback (good and bad) from owners in constant use.

1. Liveaboards - how is it working for full-time use? As your only head?
2. Tropics/Warm weather - still a good choice?
3. When cruising outside US, any issues in replenishing coir/peat?
4. What do you like most about it? Least?
5. Compared to a higher-grade marine toilet (Raritan Elegance, etc.), would you still chose your Compost Head?

Thanks in advance -

Peter

"I work as a broker, and composting toilets are a big turn off for most buyers. It's tough to reinvent the wheel. I'll personally stick with my Raritan marine head."

Peter, I recommend you read the threads here on CF about composting toilets. They pretty much cover the pros and cons. You'll find that people with them are almost always very satisfied and would never go back to a regular marine toilet. A lot of people who have never used them seem to have opinions though... usually along the lines of not wanting to handle to emptying part. It's not an issue. I've had my Nature's Head for about 6 years and I love it- no smell, no problems, easy to maintain, reliable, nothing to break or leak and you gain a ton of storage when you rip out the old system.

To answer your questions:

- 1) Works great for 2 people full time. 3 people full time starts to strain the system and you have to dump more frequently. 4 or more is probably not a good idea.
- 2) They work great in the tropics. No issues.
- 3) Coconut coir bricks are small and easy to store. Carry a supply and replenish when you find more. Pretty common everywhere in gardening stores. In a pinch, you can always use sawdust, peat or something else until you locate coir.
- 4) (see above).
- 5) I would never go back to a regular marine head (of any brand). I love the simplicity, reliability and zero-smell of my composting toilet. No regrets whatsoever.

We have three heads, two on board. Having started in the Great Lakes, a zero discharge zone, the Airhead was a necessity for extended cruising in much of the Lakes and North Channel. We planned to continue using it as we reached into the Caribbean. There are few (none) places to dump it ashore. The ground is hard stone mostly and locals want nothing to do with your pot of treasure. We found the only place to empty the head is at sea, under way. Messy and dangerous. We did this for a while.

Concerning the "ick-factor", I was also skeptical at first. I knew I wanted to get rid of my marine toilet, but wasn't sure about composting toilets. I read everything on the net, focused on the comments of users (all positive) and bit the bullet, so to speak, and ordered one. With the shipping to Brazil and the 100% tax, it wasn't a decision I took lightly (about USD2k in the end). I was pleasantly surprised the first time I dumped the solids bin. It looked like potting soil and smelled like damp peat. No "ick" at all. Besides, it's not like you have to get your hands in it- you just put a bag over the top and turn it over. You can also dump in the woods (off the path) or at sea (outside the limits). The urine bottle I simply dump over the side (every day or two). Urine is sterile.

Would I do it again?

ABSOLUTELY!

1. 5 years with it as a liveaboard. 15 years without it before.
2. Tropics- all 5 years with it in Hawaii. Does just fine.
3. Replenishing media, it's too easy to store many years worth, so not a good question really. But I also carry sawdust pellets, which make it that much easier. A little water and you have sawdust. Whatever you use, the secret is to decompress it with water, then allow it to dry out again.
4. What I like most is that I don't store wet sewage on my boat. That, and no need for pump out stations. I could go on.

It is just such a non-issue. But like so many before me, pulling the trigger was scary. There is a learning curve, and if you don't get it right, you might have to deal with gnats and whatever other things that people mention. (Gnats are an indication that the moisture in the solids isn't drying out).

I really tried to keep this short, but I'm just so happy that I no longer deal with wet sewage aboard.

We have a Nature's Head on our Seaward 32RK and think it's great. No smell! 🍃 What would be our holding tank now gives us an extra 30 gallons of potable water storage.

We had a "C" Head on another boat and liked it as well. Again, no smell and more storage. We use coir for the medium. If I ever get my dream boat (Outbound 46) I'll definitely do composing toilets again!

Not having to find a pump-out station, every seven to ten days, or dump offshore, makes emptying the container just a minor inconvenience. For full time use, it only needs to be done every four to six weeks.

I left all of my holding tank connections in place, when it is time to sell the boat, I'll install a marine head and take my composter to my next boat... 😊

Have a CHead but haven't used it enough to have valid input as to its suitability. Have a 28' boat and the PO's installed holding tank wiped out valuable storage that I couldn't live without. The CHead was an easy one step solution that has so far worked but I'm not cruising or using it regularly.

When we were cruising, we spent most of our time anchored out in remote areas. With a composting toilet, would want to have some experience with how much composting media was actually needed. Restocking for us would have meant a 600 mile sail, at the minimum, in areas we spent the most time in with no guarantee that Coconut coir or any other suitable composting material would have been available after we sailed that distance to find it.

Personally hate holding tanks, they stink. They are also a PITA to empty IF PUMP OUT FACILITIES ARE AVAILABLE AND WORK even in the US. Once you head south, better be able to pump overboard or you'll have a mess on your hands.

Last winter I installed an Airhead after removing all the old plumbing, tank and head. Very easy installation. I used an existing vent in the head to connect the exhaust fan. It has worked great for us and I don't miss the pump outs, smell or joker valve replacement! More room for storage where the tank once lived. There were 4 of us aboard for

5 weeks and the solids tank was emptied half way thru the trip and again at the end, although it was not completely full. Liquids over the side or into the toilet at marinas once per day. The small fan uses so little energy that its not an issue at all. Crew had no problem using the composting head since there are no valves, pumps or anything confusing to deal with. Ignore the comment from the broker as to resale. A stinking holding tank can always be reinstalled. Of course I would never do that as long as I own the boat!

Had a Nature Head on our previous boat for 8-10 years which included spending 3-5 months every other winter in the Bahamas full time and we loved it! No more smell, no worries about the southern Florida "Head Nazi's" or other states pump out logs

Last December bought a "new to us" '89 Morgan 44 CP sloop with one electric and one manual head and two very small holding tanks (and lots of smell). I am currently replacing them both with new Nature Heads. By removing all the old plumbing I hope to have all the smell gone before we head South this winter

One more quick note from someone who would never go back. I love my C head. No ick factor, no smell, no bugs, even without a fan.. My previous boat always smelled even after cleaning the tank and replacing the hoses with the best available.

Installed a Nature's Head four or five years ago. Never a problem. No stink. No hoses to replace. No flushing situations to resolve... truly a yuk factor. And, as mentioned, the composted residue is much like potting soil. No stink and no mess.

We liveaboard full-time and love our C-Head. We also kept one wet head for when that would work. The C-Head is off the cabin we sleep in and it is odor free. We use coir and empty once per week; I'd like to try compressed sawdust. If we do not have a good place to dump the medium it goes in the dumpster with our trash.

Someone mentioned the 'ick-factor'. We can be so delicate!! I'm not sure how one can make it in the 'real' world and be so squeemish. We like our composter a lot - the feces part isn't much of a problem; the few concerns/raised eyebrows we've had involve the separate tank for urine. To keep everything working smoothly and uncluttered, ALL toilet paper goes in the waste basket next to the head, just like it does traveling in most of the 'Third World', assuming t.p. is even available. We do the same thing in our motorhome. Reduces plumbing problems dramatically...

A neglected marine head stinks, and a neglected composting toilet stinks. But even when working well, one of these options still requires almost daily attention... all while playing with your own waste.

We cruised for years with a conventional head and had zero issues (Raritan PHII). I replaced the joker valve once a year as a maintenance item, but the other 364 days I was able to blissfully ignore the head (in areas with direct discharge). The holding tank was an issue when in the States, but that was the only negative we had in 5 years with the system.

Our new boat didn't have a convenient location for a holding tank or associated plumbing, so I decided a composting toilet would be the easiest and most cost effective solution. I now get the opportunity to play with a pee jug every other day and every few weeks a poo container... and somehow this is suppose to be better than once a year touching the joker valve?

I replaced my traditional head with a composting head. Gain 2 storage lockers, no more persist head smell, I'd do it again in a microsecond. I line the inside with a kitchen sized garbage bag which lines the bottom and sides. When it's time to empty, slide the bag out, seal it, put a new one in with 'the fiber'. I've used peat moss and coconut husk for the fiber. The local paper processing plant smells worse.

Late to the game Peter. I haven't read all the responses. Hopefully not too many of the naysayers have come out. This topic seems to attract a lot of uninformed opinion.

I've cruised as a couple for must something like seven or eight years now with a Nature's Head. IMO it is one of the best upgrades we've done to our boat. Before that we cruised with a standard marine head with holding tank. I never had any serious problems with it — that's not why I switched. We moved to a composter:

#1. To recover a significant amount of storage space previously occupied by tank and hoses. In its place we now carry two inflatable kayaks, a couple of sails, and miscellaneous tools.

#2. Remove the limitation of having to find a pump out facility. We can essentially cruise indefinitely with the composter. In reality we usually carry enough coir for about a year. It fits in a pretty small space.

#3. Greatly simplify our head system. There's really not much to a composter, and not much to go wrong.

#4. Improve the safety of our boat by removing two holes in our boat (inflow of water, and outflow of yuck).

To answer your questions:

#1. It works great. We are two people, full time. It is our only head.

#2. I have mostly cruised in colder climes (northern Ontario and now Newfoundland), although I did spend three seasons in Lake Ontario where it can get pretty damn hot. These heads work *better* in warmer temps, but even where I am they work just fine.

#3. Hmm, I only cruise outside of the US — in Canada. But I get your point. I've had zero issue sourcing coir. I usually buy mine in bulk through various online sources. Like I said, coir is compressed, so it takes very little space to carry a lot. If I had to I could easily carry five years of the stuff without missing the storage space.

#4. Like most? I guess my list above outlines that. Like least? I guess it's when I have to dump things. The pee bucket gets dumped every two to three days. The main tank averages four weeks for us. I can't say it's a pleasant task, but it's really not a big deal. I just tip the contents into a plastic garbage bag. Takes about 10-15 minutes.

#5. Absolutely. Like I said, it is one of the best improvements we did to our boat. Not saying other systems are bad. The electro disposers are great if you have a lot of power. The chemical treatment systems look fine too, but seem complicated. I just think a composer is superior.

A big caveat though. These heads are designed for two, maybe three adults for full time use. You can have more people for short periods, but not for full time. If I was full time with a larger crew size I would not recommend a composter.

Just for the record I bought my Seawind in 2012 with a Nature's Way installed. I was agnostic about composting heads but figured if worst came to worst I could go conventional. As time passed it became clear this would not happen. I am still on the huge amount of coir the PO left on the boat; taking up a little less space than of 6 rolls of toilet paper. Only problems I have had is when I don't keep up with the level of pee in the pee bottle and it over flows; but that only happened once. I do have a waste basket where all the TP goes. I do use pet carpet cleaner in the drain to the pee bottle after each use. I did replace the 60mm computer fan for venting with a 90mm fan; bought 5 for \$US12 on ebay and gave 2 to a friend with a composting head. Key to success is moisture level. The vent fan helps and if you have a really loose BM you can always add a little more something. I bought some cat litter but have only used it once.

Cruising in the FI Keys, and down island; sub tropics not really tropics. Doubt I would ever go back to a conventional head; but I never say never.

We are satisfied with the CHEAD we installed in our trimaran three years ago.

The only time when a conventional head seemed better to me was when the kids were ill and had diarrhea for a week. Spraying poo just cleans up more easily in a round bowl with a flushing system. :-)

Any good workarounds for that ugly scenario? In the end we used the head just as a seat with a single-use plastic bag filled with coconut fiber underneath

Yes. We have an older Nature's head from 2008. Boat was in Puerto Rico the first 4 years. We lived on board for 9 months in 2016-17 from Maine to Bahamas. We still like it.

In a heartbeat! Never going back!

Agree, we have one now for 3 years and love it. No more pump out and smell. It's great

Perhaps I'm not your typical liveaboard as I'm mostly "stationary" in the Sacramento Delta... no ocean cruising, etc. But I use toilets...and I recently installed a Nature's Head composting toilet in my small pontoon houseboat. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. No pump out headaches, in control of the process, no smell, no hassle.

Believe it or not, my composting toilet has no smell. I'm religious about keeping the poop trap shut when no being used. And the lid down all the time too. And I spritz w vinegar water fairly regularly. I turn over the "compost" , especially when I've not been aboard for couple of days. Recently some small black fly-like bugs have shown up in the compost chamber. Diatomaceous earth sprinkled into compost /coir has cut down on that. But smell? Nope. Nothing obnoxious. My living space is small. And head is about in middle of that space. Odor would be very noticeable... and disturbing. But not so far, anyway.