

Ship Happens

By Caroline Ajootian

Finding a transporter online may seem like a great way to save money, but buyers beware



Using an online transport broker to arrange an overland boat move backfired on a number of consumers including the owner of this catamaran.

PHOTO BY MARSHALL AKROYD

Serious complaints about several boat-shipping companies that transport boats overland have been reported to the BoatU.S. Consumer Protection Bureau (see the accompanying sidebar). These complaints share a common thread: Each of the consumers used the online transportation services clearinghouse, uShip.com, to locate the companies hired to move their boats. The consumers contacted BoatU.S. last fall, after reading an article in *BoatU.S. Magazine* (September 2009) describing how uShip.com, which is an auction-style web site where consumers wishing to move boats, households goods, cars, and even pets and livestock get bids from a broad spectrum of transportation service providers (TSPs). They wanted to warn their fellow BoatU.S.

members that, although uShip.com's service is a convenient way to find transport companies, gaps in the site's system leave consumers vulnerable.

For example, the consumers learned after the fact that it is not uShip's policy to verify or validate the claims about experience, insurance coverage and licensure made by trucking companies. uShip does point this out in their "uShip User Agreement," but the consumers with whom we spoke felt this wasn't emphasized enough. Commercial carriers must meet state and federal guidelines for personal, property, and cargo insurance and apply for operating authority, the trucking equivalent of a business license. The consumers complain that uShip did little to assist when they had problems with the companies they found through the web site. They

also state that the negative comments they posted on the site were deleted from the companies' listing pages, which uShip personnel deny.

TSPs, also known as carriers in the shipping trade, pay nothing to become listed as uShip.com "members." The process works on the honor system: Members agree to meet all state and federal licensing and insurance regulations, but they're not required to show proof as a criterion for listing. Consumers who wish to have boats moved by uShip.com members post their transportation plans online and TSP members place bids for the job. uShip charges consumers a transaction fee based on the cost of the transport once a contract is in place, but plays no role in pricing or arranging for actual transports. According to Jami Caruso of the company's Community,

Trust and Safety division, “uShip is a neutral online marketplace for shipping and moving services” where “shippers and transportation service providers can meet and enter into agreements. We certainly do care very deeply about all of [our] members because they are the ones that have made uShip so successful.”

Nevertheless, Caruso said, “uShip does not prequalify or validate the claims of TSPs with respect to their licensure, insurance, and registration. The uShip web site functions solely as a neutral venue for the purpose of connection between members. Because uShip is not involved in the actual transaction between shippers and service providers, we have no control over the accuracy of listings, the ability of service providers to transport items, or the ability of shippers to send items. uShip cannot ensure that a shipper or service provider will actually complete a shipment.”

Although uShip.com makes it possible for customers to post ratings for the TSPs they use, the boat owners who contacted BoatU.S. said that their negative posts were deleted. “Regarding posting negative comments in a [uShip] forum, as a neutral venue, we do not take or modify any comments posted on the site unless they are in violation of our policies,” Caruso told BoatU.S. “We do not promote any members, nor do we attempt to send business away from any members. Again, this would take away our neutrality. We’re not an authoritative figure. If a shipping customer contacts us with a dispute, depending on the nature of the dispute, we can offer to contact the provider on the customer’s behalf. If the customer so chooses, we contact the provider and give them a short period of time to respond. If they do not comply, the account is suspended for non-communication.”

Per the terms of the “uShip User Agreement,” the three consumers who spoke to BoatU.S. said their transaction fees were refunded when they reported they were unhappy with the trucking companies.

The Take-Home Message

Online auction sites such as uShip, brokering everything from airline tickets to home mortgages, have proliferated on the Internet. They provide a convenient one-stop way of comparison-shopping for services, but consumers must still be

pro-active when evaluating prospective companies.

■ Before doing business with any interstate transportation service provider, ask for a copy of the company’s Operating Authority documentation issued by the U.S. Dept. of Transportation or comparable state and local documents for intrastate carriers. In addition, TSPs must obtain insurance and drivers must have commercial driver’s licenses, which include testing requirements for drugs and alcohol. Ask also for proof of liability and cargo insurance. Reluctance to provide this information is reason enough to look elsewhere.

■ DOT makes it easy to check up on the status of commercial carriers’ licenses, their insurance data, or their safety ratings. Consumers can visit the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) web site, <http://li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov> or call 800-832-5660 or 202-366-9805.

■ All transportation agreements should be in writing, with complete information about costs, taxes, tariffs, scheduling, security, and pickup and delivery locations, as well as rules about refunds for cancellations or delays.

■ Ask the carrier for specific instructions about preparing the boat for traveling overland. Secure or, better yet, remove all loose items in the cabin and from on deck. Lock cabin doors, hatches and ports. Sailboat masts and rigging must be unstepped.

■ Carefully inspect your boat before and after it’s loaded and note its condition on the carrier’s “condition of cargo” form. Do the same when the boat is delivered, to document any damages that may have occurred en route.

■ The Dept. of Transportation will investigate complaints about carriers. Consumers can call 888-368-7238, Monday-Friday 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. ET for more information.

The BoatU.S. Consumer Protection Bureau “Dispute Mediation Program” handles hundreds of complaints from association members each year, and maintains the online “Consumer Protection Database” containing reports about boats, marine engines, boating products, and related services for consumers wanting to report complaints or good experiences. E-mail consumerprotection@BoatUS.com or call 703-461-2856 or visit BoatUS.com/consumer.

Three Tales Of Shipping Woe

I contracted over the Internet with Maxumpower Transport to truck a boat I’d just bought, a 2006 Glacier Bay 27 that cost \$85,000, from South Carolina to Long Island, New York. The company owner claimed to have liability insurance, the web site posted stellar comments from other customers and the company owner spoke about how experienced and professional he was. To make a long story short, the boat sustained \$8,000 in damages because the driver went under a restricted-height bridge. At first, the company owner accepted responsibility and asked for a repair estimate — then he disappeared.

— S.R., *New York, NY*

I gave Global Yacht Hauling a \$7,500 deposit to move my catamaran from Anacortes, Washington, to Baltimore. The delivery date came and went and the company never showed up. They promised to return my deposit, but didn’t. I found out later that their operating-authority license from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration had been suspended at the time they contracted with me to move my boat. Afterwards, I hired Associated Boat Transport to make the move. They were great and kept me informed every step of the way. I paid in full — no deposit up-front — when the boat was off-loaded in Baltimore.

— M.A., *Baltimore, MD*

LSA Logistics of Gardena, California, agreed to move my boat from Virginia to Florida after I paid \$27,000 up-front. They seemed knowledgeable and asked all the right questions but the move never took place and the company hasn’t returned my money. I’ve since learned that the same thing happened to a number of other boat owners. In total, we’ve all lost about \$250,000. The Riverside County (California) Sheriff’s Department is investigating our complaints and has already made one arrest. I understand their investigation isn’t over.

— M.Z., *Charlottesville, VA*