

What to Expect When Commissioning a Custom Yacht

What to expect when commissioning a custom yacht is not what the brochures describe. Many first-time owners walk into a custom yacht commission with two numbers in mind: the price the shipyard quoted during the sales conversation, and a delivery date that felt ambitious but not unreasonable. Both are often wrong, not slightly off, but wrong in ways that reshape the entire project if you're not prepared for them.

The problem isn't that shipyards are dishonest. It's that best-case assumptions fill the gaps on both sides early, before anyone has confronted the real complexity of a custom build. You're excited, you've done your research, and the brochures make the process look linear. It isn't. What follows is what the brochures won't tell you: the real timeline, the real cost structure, the real roles, and the real risks of commissioning a custom yacht from scratch.

How long a custom build actually takes

Size determines your schedule more than anything else

A 30, 50 ft custom build runs realistically 6, 18 months. A 50, 80 ft project typically takes 12, 24 months. Above 80 ft, plan for at least 24, 48 months, with larger superyachts regularly pushing into three to five years. These are not pessimistic worst-case estimates. They're the realistic centre of the range for genuinely custom builds, not semi-production vessels with a few layout changes.

Design and build phases overlap, they don't run in sequence

Most owners picture a clean sequence: design finishes, construction starts, outfitting begins. That's not how a custom build actually runs. Design development often continues while early structural work is already underway, and systems installation begins before interior design is fully resolved. Managed well, this overlap compresses the overall schedule. Managed poorly, it creates compounding problems across every trade and every supplier in the chain.

Why the original delivery date is almost never the real date

Shipyards tend to quote optimistic timelines during the sales process, that's the commercial reality. Late design changes, supply chain delays, subcontractor coordination failures, and owner-driven scope additions are not exceptional events on a custom build. They're normal. **Build a meaningful schedule buffer into your plan from day one**, experienced owners commonly plan for double-digit percent slack. That's not pessimism. That's how experienced owners approach this.

What to expect when commissioning a custom yacht: budget realities

Design, naval architecture, and engineering fees

For most custom yacht projects, professional services, including design, naval architecture, engineering, and classification support, account for roughly 7, 10% of total build cost. On more complex or highly custom projects, that number can reach 10, 12%. These are not optional line items. They're what makes the vessel seaworthy, certifiable, and built to what you actually specified. Cutting here creates problems that surface later at considerably greater cost.

Where the rest of the budget goes

Materials represent roughly 40, 50% of a typical build, depending on yard location and finish level. Outfitting and interior completion make up the bulk of the remainder. This includes systems installation covering propulsion, electrical, HVAC, navigation, and safety. Independent project management and owner's representation, when structured as a percentage of build cost, typically runs 1, 3% for larger projects, though some engagements are structured as fixed fees. These are directional planning figures. They shift materially based on yard geography, specification complexity, and how much customization is genuinely involved.

The contingency line most owners skip

Cost overruns on custom yacht builds are commonly reported at 15, 20% above the original contract price, with complex or poorly specified projects running higher. That number doesn't come from the builder pocketing extra. It comes from change orders, certification requirements, late material substitutions, crantage, trials fuel, and temporary berthing costs that sit outside the contracted build number. **Reserve at least 15, 20% beyond your quoted build cost as a dedicated contingency**, enough to match the realistic overrun average. Treat it as part of the project budget, not a safety net you hope not to need.

The build phases, milestone by milestone

Locking down the specification before a single cut is made

The custom yacht [build process](#) starts before a single piece of steel is cut. The owner's brief is developed through concept design, then refined through naval architecture and engineering into a full specification package covering hull form, stability, structural design, systems layout, and interior program. **Decisions**

made in this phase are the cheapest ones you'll ever make on this project. Reversing them once construction is underway is not cheap. Getting the specification right before build begins is one of the highest-value activities in the entire commission.

From keel-laying through outfitting: where schedule and cost are made or lost

Once the specification is locked, physical build begins. Hull and superstructure construction run first, followed by mechanical and electrical systems installation, then interior outfitting. Quality inspections at each stage, verified against the original specification, are critical. Problems found early cost a fraction of what they cost after the next phase has been completed on top of them. Milestone payments tied to verified completion rather than the calendar are how you maintain leverage throughout this period.

Sea trials, final acceptance, and handover

Sea trials and handover are not a formality. Sea trials are a full performance verification, conducted with the builder, naval architect, surveyors, and an independent technical representative present. The yacht must meet contracted performance parameters before the owner signs final acceptance. After acceptance, final payment is made, warranties commence, and the vessel is delivered. Handover documentation, operational manuals, and crew orientation should all be completed at this stage, not retrofitted afterward when everyone has already moved on.

Who's responsible for what, and where it breaks down

The yard's job and the owner's job

The yard's job is to build the vessel to the contracted specification, on time and on budget. The owner's job is to be clear about what they want, make decisions on time, and avoid scope changes that cascade through the project. In practice, these responsibilities blur constantly. Yards interpret specifications in ways that suit their workflow. Owners change their minds. Without a structured process managing scope, approvals, and communication, problems develop in the space between those two parties, and no one is clearly accountable for them.

Why an independent owner's representative changes the outcome

An [owner's representative](#) acts solely for the owner, with no commercial relationship with the shipyard. They oversee the build at the yard level, verify that work matches the specification at each stage, manage change orders, track schedule and budget, and give the owner an accurate picture of progress at all times. For owners commissioning a build at a foreign yard, this independence is protection, not a

premium service.

Yacht Consulting Group Ltd. is a Vancouver-based marine consulting firm that fills this role. The team includes working licensed captains, chief engineers, and a Chartered Engineer, and the firm maintains operating relationships at Pacific Rim shipyards, particularly in Taiwan. Yacht Consulting Group Ltd. carries no commercial ties to any builder, which means the advice owners receive is structured entirely around their interests.

Where the naval architect and classification society fit in

The naval architect carries responsibility for design intent and, depending on the engagement scope, may monitor compliance during the build. The [classification society](#) conducts independent surveys at key structural milestones and at sea trials. Neither is a substitute for day-to-day owner representation. Their scope is specific and bounded. The gaps between those roles and the yard's ongoing work are exactly where quality and specification problems develop on builds that lack continuous oversight.

The surprises that cost first-time owners most

Design and engineering issues that surface during build

Structural planning errors, weight estimates that underrun reality, and stability calculations that require mid-build adjustment are recurring problems on custom projects. They're not rare events, they're normal consequences of designing something that hasn't been built before. Catching them early requires someone reviewing shop drawings and ongoing work against the specification continuously, not waiting for sea trials to surface a problem that could have been addressed cleanly in the design phase.

Systems integration failures and scope creep

Wiring errors, equipment incompatibilities, exhaust routing problems, and mechanical systems that don't perform as specified are among the most common new build commissioning issues. They're almost always the result of insufficient systems integration review during installation. Separately, scope creep driven by owner-initiated changes after the specification is locked is one of the most reliable drivers of both delay and cost overrun. Every change after construction begins triggers rework, repricing, and schedule impact across multiple trades simultaneously.

Supply chain delays and subcontractor coordination

Custom yachts depend on a long chain of suppliers and specialist subcontractors. Material shortages, late equipment deliveries, and coordination failures between trades are routine in current build environments. Managing these risks comes down to having someone on the ground who sees problems

early and adjusts scheduling before the impact compounds into a delay that pushes your delivery six months further out.

What to lock down before you sign with a yard

Contract terms worth arguing for

Before you commit any capital, push for contract protections that give you real leverage throughout the build. Four terms are worth fighting for specifically:

- Change-order procedures with fixed approval and pricing timelines
- [Milestone payment schedules](#)
tied to verified completion, not the calendar
- Clear performance criteria for sea trials
- A defined dispute resolution process

None of these are unreasonable asks in a well-structured new build contract. If a yard resists them, that tells you something worth knowing before you sign.

Questions to ask before the ink dries

Before signing, get direct answers to these:

- What is the yard's current build schedule, and how many concurrent projects are they running?
- Who is the named project manager, and how many builds are they overseeing simultaneously?
- What is the process if a specified item cannot be sourced or is discontinued?
- How are owner-initiated changes priced and scheduled into the programme?
- How long has the yard built to your classification society's requirements?

The answers reveal operational discipline far more accurately than any brochure or showroom tour ever will.

The case for independent oversight from day one

The single most effective risk-reduction step a first-time owner can take is engaging an independent owner's representative before signing with the yard, not after problems have already emerged. An independent firm can review the contract, the specification, and the yard's proposal before any commitments are made, then maintain continuous on-site oversight from keel-laying through delivery. That's the difference between hoping the process goes well and actually managing it.

What to expect when commissioning a custom yacht: the

bottom line

Commissioning a custom yacht is a long, expensive, technically complex undertaking that rewards careful preparation and punishes wishful thinking. The owners who come through it well aren't necessarily the most experienced. They're the ones who understood early that they needed independent expertise on their side and engaged it before the first drawing was signed off.

Schedule slippage is nearly universal on custom builds, and cost overruns are common. But independent oversight significantly reduces the likelihood and magnitude of both, provided it's in place from the start, not brought in after the first instalment has already been paid. If you want to know what to expect when commissioning a custom yacht and want a candid conversation about what the process actually involves, Yacht Consulting Group Ltd. offers [independent project management](#) and owner's representation with no commercial ties to any yard.

This is a multi-year, multi-million dollar commitment. The time to get it right is before you sign.