

Tribune/Barry Kough

The Lewiston-built 42-passenger Sommer Star is ready for life in Alaska, hauling whale watchers. The broad-beamed, welded aluminum jet boat, constructed by Bentz Boats of Lewiston, has a flying bridge, galley, head and sound system, plus lots of life preservers tucked into the ceiling.

Jetting to Alaska; Lewiston boatmaker makes personal delivery of huge cargo: a 44-foot welded aluminum jet boat

ERIC BARKER

It's good work if you can get it. Bryan Bentz of Bentz Boats in Lewiston recently spent eight days delivering a 44-foot jet boat with a flying bridge to a customer in Alaska.

The custom-built boat, which will be used for whale-watching trips, is the largest the company has ever built.

It has a galley, head and raised bridge. It's powered by three diesel engines, can carry 42 passengers and three crew and cost about \$400,000.

Bentz Boats has carved itself a niche in the welded aluminum boat business by building crafts that fit the special needs of diverse customers.

"That has been this business -- building custom boats built for their area of operation," says Bentz, "and building them according to how the customer needs to operate them for their business."

Because they are custom built, each boat often has to gain approval of the U.S. Coast Guard. Since this boat will operate in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Alaska, it had to pass stringent standards for boats that operate in exposed water. The boat passed its test just before Bentz and others headed for Portland and the open sea.

"We were somewhat nervous," Bentz says. "It's a \$400,000 boat,

so there was quite a bit riding on it."

The boat was designed by its owner, Doug Ward of Dolphin Jet Boat Tours, but modified during construction. Bentz says it would not have passed the tests if it hadn't been modified.

Bentz builds custom jet boats for commercial customers, but also builds a few boats each year for private recreational boaters.

It is becoming more common for ocean-going vessels to use jet pumps for power, according to Bentz. Jet boats that use diesel engines have good fuel efficiency and better speed than prop boats, he says.

Aside from speed and fuel efficiency, the lack of prop on this boat will ensure the owner doesn't harm surfacing whales.

"I'm sure he was very cognizant if he was promoting the whale-watching business, he needs a whale-safe boat."

Bentz decided it would cost too much to ship the boat to Alaska, so decided to deliver it himself with a crew of five others. They are taking the boat down the Snake and Columbia rivers, passing through all eight dams and then up the coast of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia, then through the inside passage of Alaska and eventually to Juneau.

The boat can reach speeds of 50 miles per hour and will cruise about 40 mph, according to Bentz. It holds 390 gallons of fuel and uses about 30 gallons per hour.

"It handles very nice," he says.

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