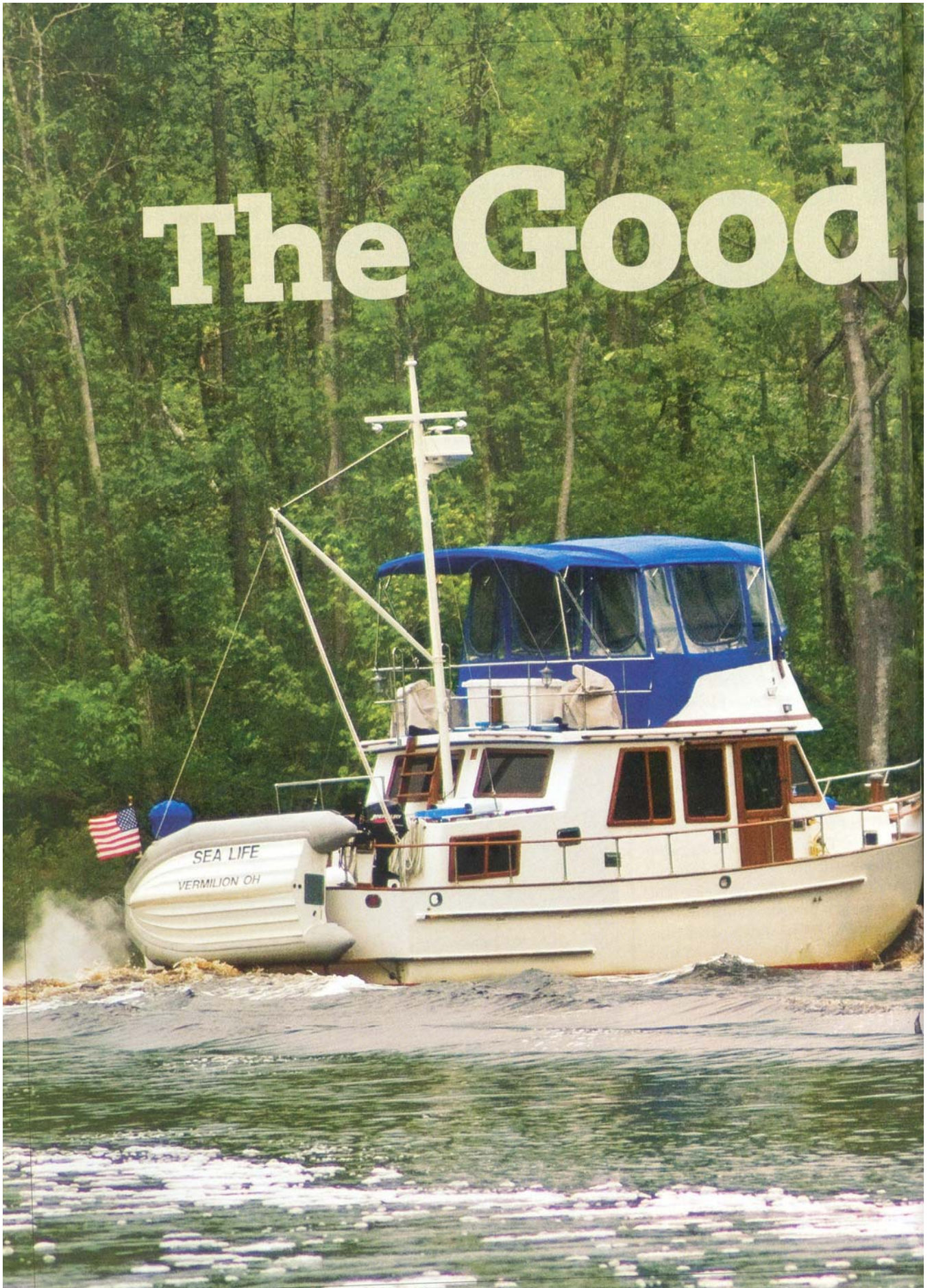


The Good



the Bad, and the Future

**The Intracoastal Waterway Is a Key Inshore Route,
But Using It Sure Isn't All Sundowners and Skittles**

**By Wendy Mitman Clarke
Photos by Katie and Gene Hamilton**

IT'S JANICE AND STEVE KROMER'S USUAL strategy to travel just before or after high tide on the Intracoastal Waterway in Georgia and South Carolina. But, when their 50-foot trawler *No Sense* entered the Little Mud River in February of this year, en route from Fort Lauderdale to Charleston, that strategy didn't pay off.

"Janice yelled, 'Go left! Go left! Go left!' I put the rudder hard over, but the boat just kept going straight," Steve reports. "The keel was in the mud, and I couldn't steer. Because the depth alarm had gone off earlier, I had already pulled the throttle back to idle, so we were only doing one or two knots when it happened. But I was dredging my own channel. I hope the sailboat that was coming the other way found it!"



**A trawler negotiates North Carolina's
Dismal Swamp Canal, where water
levels can vary widely.**



A working dredge displays a set of diamond shapes on the safe side for passing; you'll see ball shapes on the danger side.

Ah, yes, "the Ditch." For many cruisers, traveling the ICW defines the term "love-hate relationship." For all the protection that it offers from the feisty Atlantic, the waterway frequently exacts a humiliating and sometimes expensive price in groundings, misread channels, mistimed bridge openings, close encounters with submerged debris, and countless other escapades.

Even for experienced ICW cruisers like the Kromers (she's executive director of America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association, and they've been traveling the ICW for about nine years), the Ditch presents unique navigational challenges. Not the least of these is that in some areas, the depth and course of the channel can change almost daily. Given their boat's four-and-a-half-foot draft, the Kromers play the tides constantly, traveling through certain areas only around high tide, and sometimes even delaying a departure for days until the tide cycle improves. Yet, in exchange for a requirement that they take nothing for granted as they traverse the waters of the ICW, cruisers like Steve and Janice are treated to an intriguing slice of American maritime history.

Quaint towns welcome them with roses and open arms (not to mention

Laundromats and \$5-a-pound local shrimp), and there are stretches of primal, wild beauty one might never imagine on the East Coast in the early 21st century.

In the Beginning

Parts of what is now officially the *Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway* were conceived as early as the mid-1600s, when Augustine Herman dreamed up a canal that would connect the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays. By the late 1700s, politicians and entrepreneurs, among them George Washington, began building the Dismal Swamp Canal in North Carolina, chiefly as a way to ship cedar shingles from the rich swamp forests to a hungry Eastern market via Norfolk, Va.

In 1808, U.S. Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin proposed a complete inland waterway system, using both man-made canals and existing bodies of water to connect Massachusetts to Georgia, then the southernmost state. He speculated that construction would require ten years; it took more than a hundred.

Four canals were built over the next century: the Cape Cod, the Delaware and Raritan, the Chesapeake and Delaware, and the Albemarle and Chesapeake (which quickly eclipsed the Dismal Swamp Canal). By 1917, the Army Corps

of Engineers was adding cuts and channels to connect and improve tidal marshes and rivers from Georgia to Florida.

In the 1930s this network was extended south to Key West. But as Gallatin had envisioned it, the Intracoastal Waterway never truly became a viable route for large, long-distance shipping and commerce, and the advent and growth of the railway system helped limit its cost-effectiveness.

Today, most commercial traffic is short-haul and localized. That said, thousands of cruising boaters now use the ICW, which for most begins at Mile Marker Zero in the Elizabeth River off Norfolk. Since Congress doesn't recognize recreational boating as "commercial" traffic, however, lawmakers have been slow to give the corps the money it needs to keep the waterway's channels dredged to their statutory 12-foot depth and 90-foot width. In some places, a lack of dredging has made the ICW nerve-racking for any crew whose cruiser draws more than three or four feet; in other places, neglect has made the nickname "ditch" quite accurate.

The good news for cruisers heading south this fall is that late last year, Congress freed up \$13.3 million for the waterway, much of which is being used