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Around the Great Loop in 7 months, 3 weeks

Fernandina Beach couple circle the Eastern United States and Canada by boat

By MATT COLEMAN -- The Times-Union, Graphic by The Times-Union

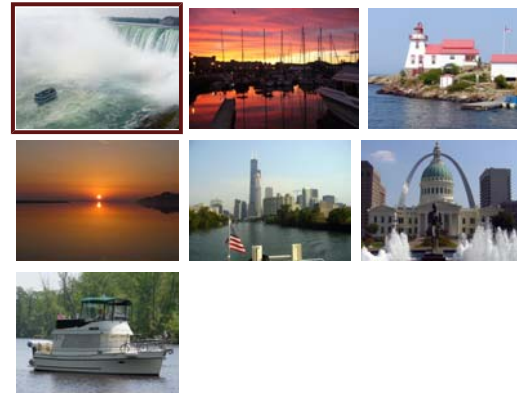
Tom and Gerry Clare are enjoying dry land again. But it took more than seven months at sea to reach that point. The Fernandina Beach couple returned recently after looping up the East Coast and through Canada and back down through Midwestern and Southern waterways.

This was the pair's third voyage since 2003 and at more than 5,000 miles, it was the longest distance they've ever sailed.



Niagara Falls, Canada: The Clares got a close look the Canadian side of the falls in June 2007. It was "AWESOME," according to their Web site post.

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Tom Clare, an AT&T retiree and former helicopter pilot, beg love affair with boating more than 20 years ago.

He said the first boat he bought was a 10-horsepower inflata and he's been hooked ever since. He met his wife, a real estat agent, shortly after he got into boating.

The couple honeymooned on a 22-foot vessel in Long Island, they've been sailing together ever since.

They even have their own titles.

"She's the admiral, I'm the captain," Tom Clare said.

#### **A three-trip guarantee**

This isn't the first lengthy boating trip for the Clares. The cou left from their home port of Amelia Island Yacht Basin in Ap 2003 for a leisurely tour of the Northeast on their 34-foot Ma Pilot named Sea Knight.

After returning home in October that year, the Clares traded i their boat for a more economical 28-foot Camano Trawler, dt the new vessel Sea Knight as well, and began planning the ne journey.

The pair left May 2005 for a trip that encompassed much of t Southern and Western United States. This time, they took the diminutive terrier, Lucy, along for the ride. They arrived bacl Fernandina Beach in November 2005 and took a six-month b from the seafaring life.

Soon enough, they began planning anew for their most exha

trip to date.

"Gerry promised me three trips," Tom Clare said.

"I don't remember that at all," Gerry Clare quickly chimed in.

After exploring much of the continental United States, the Clares decided to focus on the northern portion of the Gre: Loop to fill in all the blanks.

"We went back to the places we enjoyed during the first two go-arounds," Gerry Clare said. "We also got the chance visit some of the places we may have missed."

#### **Blogging on the high seas**

Instead of keeping a traditional captain's log, the Clares updated an online diary at [www.tomclare.com](http://www.tomclare.com) for each of the three voyages.

Tom Clare said the blog was designed to give friends, family and fellow loopers the chance to track their progress.

The Web site contains complete itineraries, blog entries of the couple's daily activities and hundreds of pictures. Gerr

Clare said a cursory glance at the site's content gives a good indication of one of the trip's main focuses.

"It seems like most of the pictures are of us going out to dinner," she said.

### **An exclusive club**

When they weren't tracking down their latest port-of-call's best culinary offerings, they were busy making friends.

The Clares are a part of America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association, a group made up of boaters who have finished or are in the process of circumnavigating Eastern North America.

Tom Clare said the cruisers' association awards potential loopers with flags to symbolize their station in the group. Wood flags mean the boat is currently traveling the loop - gold means the boat has completed the circular voyage.

Tom Clare said he and his wife joined the club as charter members, and membership numbers have ballooned ever since.

"It seemed like whenever we stopped, we'd see another boat with a Loop flag," Gerry Clare said.

They said it wouldn't be out of the ordinary to pull into port and see 13 other boats flying their Loop flags.

"It was comforting to see so many familiar faces during the trip," Tom Clare said. "Once we got settled, we'd all stop for a happy hour."

The Clares agreed that the best part of the trip was connecting with all the other loopers.

### **Slow pace, good times**

Groups were invaluable in preparing for the half-year trips, but Gerry Clare said there are some things they learned for themselves.

After two successful voyages, she said they had perfected their on-land routine. Once they hit the shore, the pair would stock up on supplies and do laundry.

"We'd sometimes stop in these tiny towns, and we'd rent bikes and ride around trying to find the nearest Laundromat," Gerry Clare said.

The Sea Knight sailed an average 35 to 40 miles a day, which accounts for about a four- or five-hour cruise.

Tom Clare said the reasonable sailing schedule gave him and Gerry Clare the opportunity to explore the area and sightsee in addition to finishing up necessary chores.

The Sea Knight stuck close to land for the majority of the trip. Tom said they were never more than 5 miles from shore, which kept their cell phones within operating range.

Gerry Clare said the on-board Sirius radio kept them updated on Jacksonville Jaguars football and news from around the country.

Most of the voyage was very smooth, but Tom Clare said crossing the Gulf of Mexico proved quite difficult.

"It was a rough, 20 hours straight of cruising," he said. He said the couple rarely sail overnight, and they would never undertake a stretch like that alone.

"We like to buddy boat to make things safer," Tom Clare said.

### The final voyage

The Clares put the Sea Knight on the market shortly after returning home Nov. 29. They said the boat was well-suited for traveling the Great Loop, but they don't have any plans to undertake another lengthy trip.

That doesn't mean they've sailed away from the boating lifestyle completely.

"When it sells, we'll buy another boat," Tom Clare said. "Probably something smaller and faster."

He said the couple will use the new boat for weekend trips in St. Augustine and St. Simons Island, Ga. He also said a smaller, more maneuverable boat would be more effective for Coast Guard auxiliary service.

During the past five years, the Clares have traveled more than 16,000 miles and visited a major portion of the United States and Canada. They said they treasured their Great Loop experience, but they are looking forward to a well-deserved stay on land.

"Traveling the Great Loop is a great life," Tom Clare said. "I honestly can't get enough."

"I've got to be careful," Gerry Clare said with a hearty laugh. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind packing up and going out again."

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The Loop **Starting point:** Amelia Island on April 9, 2007. **Ending point:** Amelia Island on Nov. 29, 2007. **How long it took:** Seven months and three weeks. **Statute miles:** 5,486. **Engine hours:** 721. **Gallons diesel fuel:** 1,480. **Tomclare.com:** Read about their experience online.

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