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Couple sails loop around eastern U.S.

Sunday, June 15, 2008 3:56 AM

BY **STEVE STEPHENS**

Many travelers love the open highway.

But the highway that Mark and Kay Heigh (pronounced Hay) rode for almost two years is one that few travelers ever venture upon.

In July 2005, the Heighs, from Gahanna, set out from Port Clinton on their 38-foot sailboat to circumnavigate the eastern United States in a giant counterclockwise loop.

Along the way they traveled the Great Lakes, the Mississippi and many other rivers, navigational canals, the Intracoastal Waterway and a few open stretches of the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean.

In July 2007, they finally returned to their starting point.

"It's a totally different perspective from the one you get driving a car on the interstates," Mr. Heigh said. "Traveling on a sailboat, you've really got time to look around and soak in all the atmosphere."

The Heighs' route (with many detours along the way) took them up the Detroit River into Lake Huron, around into Lake Michigan and then into the river and canal system near Chicago to the Mississippi River.

They followed the Mississippi to the Ohio, then through rivers, lakes and canals to the Gulf of Mexico at Mobile, Ala.



KAY AND MARK HEIGH

Kay and Mark Heigh take a break during their 6,700-mile cruise.



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Next came some open-ocean sailing followed by a voyage around Florida via the Intracoastal Waterway, with a detour to the Bahamas. Then it was on up the East Coast to Chestertown, Md., where they left their boat for several months, resuming the trip in spring 2007.

Finally, via the Hudson River and Erie Canal, the couple returned to Lake Erie, 6,700 miles after they started.

The journey is known by some as the Great Loop. The couple belongs to the Great Loop Cruisers' Association, which recognized the Heighs for their accomplishment.

The Heighs, who have been sailing recreationally for many years, both retired in 2005.

"Our original plan was we'd retire, then spend a year sailing in the Caribbean," Mr. Heigh said.

"We even had crew lined up to take it there," across 1,500 miles of open ocean.

"But insurance, on the boat and ourselves, was a deal-killer. Then some of our friends at the marina (in Port Clinton) said, 'Why not do the loop?'"

So the Heighs and friends aboard two other boats set out on the voyage. (The other boats hadn't planned to go the distance and dropped out along the way.)

The Heighs often used their boat's diesel motor, especially on rivers and canals, but sailed whenever possible.

Mr. Heigh said every leg of the voyage held fascinating experiences.

"From one mile to the next, one bend to the next, there was always something different," he said.

At one point the couple took a side trip through the Dismal Canal along the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina.

"That was an interesting way to go," Mr. Heigh said. "And going into New York Harbor was one of the highlights, especially since we anchored right behind the Statue of Liberty."

Although the couple experienced a few chilly mornings, they were fairly comfortable aboard the boat.

"We have plenty of room with all the comforts of home -- a propane stove, a refrigerator, hot and cold running water," Mr. Heigh said.

But the trip isn't for everybody, he said.

"It's a pretty good undertaking. You need a good boat; not huge, but big enough to carry all the gear.

"It's easy to say, 'I'm going to do that,' but casting off the line and saying, 'I'm going to be back in two years,' that's a big step.

"I wouldn't think it's something a beginner would want to do."

MARK AND KAY HEIGH

Mark and Kay Heigh navigated this sailboat through the Great Loop.



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So what is the allure of sailing?

"It gets you away from the hustle and bustle and things you have to think about at home," Mr. Heigh said. "You may think this is silly, but we've taken people out for a day and, many times, when we're starting to head back, they'll just lean back and kind of doze off."

"They always say, 'Oh, I'm sorry; I fell asleep.' But, hey, if you're relaxed enough to do that, to just nod off, then it's working."

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