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Blue skies, blue water attract former GH couple to sea

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BY D.J. SOBISH
news@grandhaventribune.com

It wouldn't be unfair to think Jim and Sharon Angel were a bit loopy. After all, the Grand Haven couple have spent the last nine years living aboard their boats — sailing or cruising up and down the river systems, gulfs and bays of the Eastern United States and the Caribbean.



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"Needless to say, we are enjoying our golden years," Jim said. "It's the trip of a lifetime."

Despite admiration from numerous family members, Sharon's sister, Gail Adams, could never see herself living the sea life.

"Nobody in our family wants a part of it — nobody but them," Adams said. "But we admire them for doing it."

Jim, 67, and Sharon, 64, began sailing as soon as they could. In 1999, the couple retired, sold their house and took off in a sailboat — named Blue Angel — from Chicago.

"I think it's amazing that they just sold everything and live on a boat," Adams said.

Their efforts were recognized by America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association this year with an honorary "BaccaLooperate" degree, certifying their completion of America's Great Loop. The Angels finished the loop on June 27.

The Great Loop — or just plain "loop" as its referred to by boating and cruising enthusiasts everywhere — is comprised of a series of waterways throughout the Midwest and Eastern U.S. which reach as far north as Michigan's Upper Peninsula and runs as far south as the Florida Keys.

"The number one thing we tell people is, take your time," Jim said.

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From Chicago, the Angels sailed south to Mobile, Ala., via the river system off the Mississippi River. They then sailed the Gulf of Mexico across the Florida Keys into Marathon, Fla.

The Angels flew back to Grand Haven for Christmas 1999; but by early 2000, they flew back to their boat and were headed to the Bahamas.

"Everyone you talk to about cruising, they all say that the Bahamas is their favorite place because they have taken care of all their crime issues, and the water is just beautiful," Jim said.

Since then, the Angels have returned to Grand Haven about twice each year, according to Adams, to visit with their parents and siblings.

"He writes a log that we read, but sometimes we just watch video from the trip," Adams said. "They're pretty laid back about it."

In addition to winter stops in the Bahamas and long stays in Daytona Beach, Fla., the Angels decided it was time to finish the loop. They sold their sailboat for a trawler and headed north. The name Blue Angel carried over.

In February 2007, the Blue Angel headed north through New York and back into the Great Lakes via the Erie Canal. Just a short trip around the entire Michigan coastline brought the Angels back to where they started.

The Angels said they never expected the loop trip to last this long.

"We just felt we'd try it; and if it didn't work, we'd stop and settle down somewhere," Jim said. "All of our family members supported us but one of our parents. She thought it might not last, but now it's lasted almost 10 years."

Along the shores of the 6,000-mile loop, the Angels found the history surrounding the river systems the most appealing — but a time-consuming — factor. They admittedly got "history overload" from seeing so many historical points along the Mississippi River.

"We got to sail by the house that Gen. Robert E. Lee held headquarters in during the Battle of Shiloh (in the Civil War)," Jim recalled.

The Angels have no immediate plans to venture outside the Eastern U.S. and Caribbean, but there are still some sights to see, they said. Sharon has her eyes set on more exotic lands: "We'd love to go to Cuba when it's legal," she said.

Between all the factors hindering a nine-year boating excursion — fuel, supplies, navigation and weather — the latter is the biggest issue the adventurers face.

"Weather determines our days," Jim said. "To be honest, the boat handles the weather; it's the crew that needs a break sometimes."

Supplies are not hard to come by, especially along more popular routes, according to Sharon. Most harbor towns along bays and the Gulf of Mexico have general stores right near the water.

"It's hardest along the rivers, because towns are built beyond the flood lines," Jim said. "We're pretty basic. We have a television and music. We also have a water maker, which works through reverse-osmosis."

In all their travels, the Angels say they have plenty of advice to give aspiring loopers, cruisers, sailors and just plain boaters who want to sail off into the sunset.



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"You really need some basic boating classes," Sharon said. "We see people all the time that don't even know how to anchor out."

The Angels also suggest anchoring often and eating on board, and especially taking time to appreciate the trip.

"It's all open water — everywhere is open," Jim said. "Whatever you do, take your time and don't rush through it."

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