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Boaters rendezvous at Joe Wheeler

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Jan and Nicoline Chardet's address changes by the day - if not the second.

During the past few years, they floated through Denmark, Sweden, France, the Mediterranean and Africa, courtesy of the Blue Arrow, their steel trawler house boat.

They looked stateside earlier this year, however, after an American couple in France told them about a boater mecca known as America's Great Loop.

The 5,000- to 7,500-mile trek - depending on the route taken - wraps around the Atlantic Coast from Florida to Canada, then on to the Great Lakes and through the Midwest before heading back to Florida.

The Chardets are almost done.

And they will be joined by more than 200 boaters at Joe Wheeler State Park on Sunday for America's Great Loop Cruisers Association Rendezvous - each person with their own story about the voyage that takes months. It didn't take Nicoline Chardet too long to pick up on some not so subtle contrasts here.

"It's so different from Europe," she said. "The cars, the streets - even the fish - everything's bigger." And certain things during her travels were lost in translation.

"Everyone came saying manatee, manatee," she said of a mysterious creature lurking behind their boat in Florida. "I didn't know what they were talking about."

After some research, she discovered Americans' manatee is her sea cow.



Daniel Giles/TimesDaily
Great Loopers Jan and Nicoline Chardet, of Amsterdam, Holland, stand on the bow of their 49-foot pilot boat "Blue Arrow" as they show off their Great Loop Association pennant.

Frank and Terry Maitland, a retired Connecticut couple also on the backside of the loop, are satisfied with how they are spending their golden years.

"There's always a question of what you want to do when you retire," he said. "We think we found the greatest answer. This is the greatest adventure you can have on a boat other than circumnavigation."

The two are no strangers to the water. They describe themselves as "sailors that just got old."

They aren't in any hurry, either. Their 36-foot trawler goes 7 mph. On average, they travel 50 miles a day.

The rendezvous will run Sunday through Wednesday at Joe Wheeler.

In addition to safety seminars, there will be a boat crawl, in which boaters can compare rides and locals can quiz participants on what it takes to complete the trip.

This is just another stop for Jeff and Izzy Rogers, of Irvine, Calif., who said they enjoyed the homey atmosphere of the towns along the Tennessee River.

Along with their dog, Ben, who doubles as first mate, they want to make it to the Bahamas before hurricane season.

"There's not a whole lot to complain about," Izzy said. "It's been great."

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