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Retirees Spend Year Traveling The 'Great Loop'

Couple Lives Life To The Fullest At Sea

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OLD SAYBROOK —

Ray and Linda Corrette are cruising through life in the slow lane, at about 7 knots per hour, to be precise.

Last year, the retirees packed up, sold their house and took off on a "big adventure," touring the Great Lakes, the Mississippi River, Florida and the Eastern seaboard on their 1980s diesel-powered boat.

On June 6, exactly one year to the day and 5,300 miles later, they docked in Old Saybrook. But they don't plan to stay long. They're having too much fun enjoying a nomadic lifestyle on their boat, dropping into places such as Mackinac Island in Michigan, or Columbus, Miss., and Punta Gorda, Fla., for days or weeks at a time — as long as they see fit.

"It's a dream of anybody who's a boater," Linda said. "We have experienced so many great places and wonderful people."

Ray, a former manufacturing engineer, and his wife, who used to work for the accounting department in Old Saybrook's town hall, planned their trip for years before setting out. As lifelong boaters, they had long envisioned completing "the great loop," a circumnavigation of America's Eastern waterways. The route has been popularized by America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association, which the Correttes joined before setting out on their tour.

The couple, both from Hartford and in their early 60s, have been married for 41 years. They lived in Old Saybrook more than a decade before deciding to pull up the anchor for good.

Their friends "thought we were crazy," Linda said. "Except for our boater friends; of course they understood."

They bought a boat, a Krogen Manatee, one of just 99 built between 1983 and 1991, Ray said. It has all the amenities a long-distance boater could want: good fuel economy, a 9-by-12 main salon, a queen-size bed, a three-burner stove, a gas grill, and a washer and dryer. And of course the main deck, which Linda calls her "back porch."



"They're kind of like a cult classic type of a boat," she said. "They have so much room."

The Correttes named it the "Summertime," an appropriate name for a vessel that lets them live in a state of permanent vacation.

One of the most fun things about cruising the great loop, Linda said, is being a part of a tight-knit community of boaters, also known as "loopers," who make the trip. The Correttes get about 10 to 20 e-mails a day from people ahead of or behind them on the tour, giving or asking for advice about local sights to check out, places to eat or where to buy cheap fuel.

The boaters, many of them also retirees, often find themselves meeting and then reconnecting in another port. And it's no surprise: Last year more than 150 boat owners told America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association they planned to take the trip. Sometimes the Correttes spent a few days or weeks with a "buddy boat," traveling together and tying their boats hull-to-hull in the same port.

"Any time there's any bunch of us where we are we dock and we just have a kind of party," Linda said.

Generally it takes about a year to complete the loop, although some boaters who aren't retired do it in portions. The Correttes traveled according to the weather, hitting Canada in the summer and going south for the winter. They traversed the Hudson River and St. Lawrence Seaway, skimmed around the top of Michigan, cruised down to Chicago and the Mississippi River, and meandered along the Tenn-Tom Waterway, which runs along Alabama, before reaching the Gulf of Mexico and Florida.

Along the way, the Correttes stopped in places recommended by "Skipper Bob" and other guidebooks, staying a while when the mood struck. They planned to spend only a day in Columbus, Miss., but liked it so much they stayed 2½ weeks — long enough to get their hair cut, go to the dentist and gain a new appreciation for southern cooking.

By the time they arrived in Florida, it was already November. They wintered four months in Punta Gorda and the Florida Keys before heading back north in April.

In some places, the Correttes didn't even have to worry about land transportation. Many marinas provide free courtesy cars, Linda said. Other times they used their legs, walking or backpacking wherever they went. They both honed their skills at chatting up the locals for recommendations on where to go and what to do.

"You kind of just have to wing it," Linda said. "It's great fun."

Now, back in Old Saybrook to see old friends, the Correttes are docked at the Ragged Rock Marina and planning to stay for a couple weeks before heading out again. First they're heading to Block Island for an annual Fourth of July reunion, then it's on to the Bahamas.

Someday, when the Correttes find a charming enough locale, they plan to settle down again. But that day hasn't come just yet.

"So far we haven't found the place," Linda said. "We're very content to live as gypsies and keep on cruising."

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