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Current Boating News

“Unwinding” Around Our Great Loop

Cruising the Great Loop – about 6,000 miles around the eastern half of North America – is a grand adventure, full of challenges even for experienced long range cruisers. It is also an increasingly rare opportunity in modern urban lives, something not often discussed in how-to articles about this magnificent cruising odyssey.

We might call it “unwinding.” By “unwinding,” we mean a magical sort of emotional decompression which my wife Carol and I have discovered on all our extensive cruises. It is an under-the-radar phenomenon, except in the privacy of our logbooks, but is a real reward for “doing the Loop.”

I first discovered this benefit of extended living aboard moving vessels during a career as a Navy officer and eventually as a ship captain. Our cruises took us about seven months at a time into far oceans, and once in a while into harm's way. I learned that the ship's routines, and the feeling of security of always having our own bunks with us, did much to soften separations and hardships.



Just moving ourselves along our course line provides challenges and adventures aplenty, of course. Those challenges are different than land living challenges in that we can, to a much larger extent, control our own small world in our vessel. We make our own decisions about routes, weather, anchorages or marinas, whether to push or to ease back. We are not bombarded by electronic media distractions, commuting road rages, neighborhood issues or politics. We are, in our boats, more the masters of our daily lives. We slip into “the Zone” of our daily cruising routine, like turtles, independently taking our house with us, so we are always at home, wherever we happen to be. This is a magical feeling, never to be moving in and out of hotels, motels, cars and airplanes, as we travel.

Many people who have “cruising” boats never actually cruise more than a weekend, a week or at most two weeks at a time. They are using their boats too heavily “on quality time” to experience “unwinding.” Their vacation clocks are ticking too loudly, and the workaday world is only pushed back temporarily, and still looms over their lives afloat. Will the weather hold until we get home? Can we squeeze in another stop, or not? People on short vacations on their boats hardly ever experience cruising as we do, as we settle in for months at a time in our floating snuggeries.

What is it, exactly, which brings us back to long distance cruising, both on the gentler Great Loop and its side trips, or to the crystal clear waters of the winter Bahamas' banks, or up and down the Eastern seaboard with the seasons? Partly it is the camaraderie of seeing fellow America's Great Loop Cruisers Association burgees, making us instant neighbors of the journey. We meet, and already share the common bond of our parallel travels, earning mutual respect at having met our own challenges along the route.



What I noticed was that the routine of being underway becomes soothing after a few weeks, and that other outside distractions tend to fade some. There is immediacy in just moving the ship, or the boat, safely along its track; in gazing out the pilothouse window, anticipating the next challenge ahead; finding food and laundries and sights to see. Our world of immediate concerns shrinks to today, this hour, this evening's stopping place. Bills, taxes, traffic, complex interpersonal intrusions fade. What is important and focuses our attention is moving our boat safely and comfortably together from A to B.



Stopping only in marinas as we cruise somewhat dilutes our feeling of cares slipping away. Marinas force us back into the land world we seek to be apart from. The Great Loop can be covered with marina stops every night, but why? Conversely, this inland voyage is much enhanced by seeking out quiet anchorages now and then, where almost all serious cruisers sooner or later can become overwhelmed by the tranquil beauty of their surroundings. Even in the urbanized East Coast corridor, there are still many quiet wilderness anchorages and waterways.

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Afloat, we live in a secret garden of creatures and greenery totally unknown to those land-bound folk pounding up or down our dangerous Interstates.

Then, as we follow the bends up the Hudson's majestic canyons to discover the Erie Canal's little towns, welcoming tie ups and laidback folks, the awareness of how fortunate we are, intensifies. We can feel ourselves beginning our 'unwinding.' Land travel has nothing to match this feeling of oneness with our surroundings. But the best is yet to come.



After crossing Lake Ontario, perhaps exploring in the Thousand Islands, we enter another world – that of the Trent Severn Waterway connecting Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay. Suddenly, we are transported back in time. The dozens of ancient, sometimes even hand-cranked wooden-gated and granite-walled locks have silently moved vessels for over 100 years. A lock tender, and a seasonal college student assistant, tend their flower beds, proudly lining their lock. As they handle our lines, we chat about what comes next, all at a pace completely foreign to most of our "normal" lives. One lock tender even serenades us on his accordion. Another offers fresh local produce. In the 21st century, we fall into a time warp to earlier priorities. We begin to unwind.

On the way, we find Stony Lake, or Balsam Lake, or any of a dozen other side water Muskoka anchorages just off the magenta line on our charts. Our anchor ripples the reflections. As sunset fades, silence unlike in any city or suburb envelopes us. We are alone amidst the beauty of Nature's own world. We find ourselves smiling goofily at each other, and Carol breathes a contented sigh as she settles into the cool cockpit for our savory supper.



Then it happens.

A swimming loon calls its high, warbling and echoing ethereal call, haunting us to our very centers. We hold our breaths, smiling at each other, waiting... waiting. Yes! There! An answering loon's cry, distant; a wailing tremolo out of the very core of eons-old nature, stirring our very

souls. You don't hear this in marinas, or in cities. Not like this, pure and free. This is our day's reward for anchoring out and listening, over cocktails, coffee or tea, for nature's symphony. I feel waves of gratitude for our good fortune, for my perfect shipmate, to be in this place, on this soft night. Or perhaps it isn't loons another night, but the lingering notes of the sternwheeler Julia Belle Swain's steam calliope in the distance on the northern Mississippi. These are magical sounds hardly noticed ashore.

We are masters and mistresses of our own small world, a world of breathtaking simplicity. This is the secret, unspoken reward of long range cruising, the slowly unfolding but pervasive 'unwinding' of modern life which reveals to us, all afresh, the essence of simply being, of gently pursuing this day's goal. Tension is mostly a thing of the other world, unless it is the healthy passing tension of a navigational challenge to meet, or of filling the larder, or maintaining the iron and electronic beasts which move us. We have 'unwinded,' finally, and happily.



Written By: Rick Butler

Rick and Carol Butler have logged over 40,000 miles in both sail and power cruising boats, living aboard over 9 years of coastal and Great Loop cruising. They've completed over 1 1/2 Great Loop cruises and fly both the AGLCA gold burgee and the Commodore's red Burgee of the Seven Seas Cruising Association. In an earlier life, Rick commanded two US Navy ships and coached offshore sailing at the US Naval Academy. Their land home is on the Atlantic ICW near Beaufort, South Carolina. They are members of the America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association - www.greatloop.org.

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