

Group invaluable to boaters traveling 'Loop'

By Bill Henley
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Steve and Janice Kromer run America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association, which is a community of boaters who travel the waterways of the eastern United States. The Kromers are holding a burgee that members display on their boats. They said it is one of the ways members recognize each other on their journeys.

When Steve and Janice Kromer take a tour of the countryside, they literally start on the side of the country.

The Kromers, 63 and 59 respectively, are part of a community of travelers who are visiting the United States by boat. The two run the America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association, an organization of boaters who share stories and advice on how to lap the eastern half of the United States by water.

"Most people don't realize until they see the map that you can go around the eastern third of the United States by boat," Steve said.

From Charleston, a boater would take the Intracoastal Waterway north and make a left at the Hudson River in New York, take the Erie Canal and continue through the Great Lakes, pick up the Illinois River and continue on the Mississippi to the Gulf Coast, where they head toward the tip of Florida and make their way back to the Lowcountry. Steve said the trip is usually made in a counter-clockwise direction because trying to go north on the Mississippi River is much slower than riding the current south.

"One of the things that's nice about it is it's a real adventure," Steve said. "But it's not like trying to sail across the Atlantic. You never feel like you're stretched out that far. There's

big waters across the Great Lakes, but you can follow along the shore the whole time. People are more comfortable."

Added to that is a sense of accomplishment. The route can total more than 6,000 miles and can be done comfortably in a year's time, but Janice advises against it. She said many people make part of the trip and dock the boat for the winter and go home until the following season when they can pick up where they left off.

"When you try to do it in one year, it's not as enjoyable," she said. "You find some place beautiful and then you don't stay long enough to enjoy it because you're trying to get to a place by a certain time. It's better when you break it up over several seasons and keep a loose schedule."

Loop Cruisers' was founded by Ron and Eva Stob, who did the trip in 1996 and published the book, "Honey, Let's Get a Boat" detailing their adventure. The organization was established in 1999 to help promote the sale of the book and the group has grown to more than 2,000 member boats.

"The association is essentially a group of people who are dreaming about taking a boat trip around the Great Loop, making progress on it or have already done it," Janice said.

The Kromers live in West Ashley and run their two businesses, a data services business and the association, out of Summerville. They took over management of the association in March 2007 when the Stobs said they were ready to retire.

The Loop Cruisers' Web site at www.greatloop.org is a veritable library of information to help. Members glean information about the journey through each other's blogs. Stops and stores are recommended along the way. Boaters e-mail each other about hazards along their routes just as citizens band radio operators do on the roads, and it provides another level of help for boaters who need assistance.

"You really have to have a sense of adventure. It's not your typical go-out-on-the-lake-for-a-Sunday-afternoon kind of boating," Janice said. "It's really intense. You need to be fairly knowledgeable about what you're doing and you're going to get into situations that you didn't expect, so you need to be ready for an adventure and open-minded and flexible."

Steve talked about one boater who ran into some trouble around Myrtle Beach.

"Somebody came by and waked him. It pushed his boat onto the rocks and put a hole in his boat. It was six months later, but somebody saw that boat and called the cops," he said.

"The owner of the boat was heavily fined," Janice added. "That was due to Loopers communicating on the e-mail saying you need to watch out for that boat."

The association recently added a tie-in with Google Earth so members can log themselves into a locator where members can call up the map and see where other members are. The Kromers ask members to e-mail their impressions of their journeys once each has completed the loop.

"Often they say the adventure was nice, but it was the other Loopers that really made it special. It really is a family of boaters," Janice said.

Most of the members are at least 50 years old: people who are established in their careers and have managed to create more flexibility in their schedules.

Janice said Steve was the boating enthusiast at the beginning and she filled the role of reluctant partner, but it doesn't take long to notice that she is as gung-ho about the travel as he is.

"I'm a control freak. I'm a scheduler. I'm a list person. It drove me crazy on the boat because you couldn't plan," she said. "When I finally just put it all away and let go of it and decided to enjoy it, it happened. It's so relaxing, it's fantastic."

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