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## The Great Loop

by Marti Attoun

Guy Leverett pilots his 37-foot trawler slowly across the harbor in Charleston, S.C., enjoying the afternoon sunshine as a dolphin swims a few feet away in the boat's wake.

"You never know what you're going to see," says Leverett, as he motors past huge container ships that make a nearby tugboat look like a toy.

Every day brings surprises for Leverett and his wife, Peggy, who locked up their home in Apollo Beach, Fla. (pop. 7,444), in March and embarked on a 9-month, 6,000-mile journey to circumnavigate the eastern United States on an all-water route known as the Great Loop.

"People had one of two reactions to our trip," says Peggy, a retired nurse practitioner. "They said, 'You're absolutely crazy. I'd never do that' or, 'You're going to have the adventure of your life.'"

The Leveretts planned their waterborne adventure for two years before they set out on their cruise of a lifetime. Guy, a retired physician's assistant, took boat-handling and engine-repair courses so he could pilot and maintain the Southern Comfort, the 1983 Atlantic trawler, which they bought for \$130,000 and refurbished for \$40,000.

### All aboard

Once they departed, the couple quickly settled into their roles, with Guy as captain and Peggy as first mate, relieving her husband at the wheel, and securing the lines when they dock or pass through 145 locks along the route.

Though they must keep an eye on the tides and weather conditions, cruising the Great Loop isn't fraught with the same peril as open ocean travel. "We usually have land in sight," says Guy, who navigates both with paper maps and electronic devices that chart the boat's location and the water's depth.

At night, the Leveretts anchor the boat offshore, or dock at a marina and dine at a local restaurant. In the morning, Peggy fixes breakfast in

the kitchen of their floating home. "We drink coffee, read e-mail and pay the bills online," she says, "then get the boat ready and pull up anchor."

The couple motor along at a leisurely 7 knots—about 8 mph—and average 50 miles a day, often stopping to see the sights, enjoy an ice cream cone, do laundry or take a stroll along the beach. They forward their mail to marinas along the route and communicate with family and friends by cell phone, computer and a blog about their trip.

Boaters cruising the Great Loop follow the Atlantic seaboard north to the Hudson River before passing through a canal system en route to the Great Lakes. From Lake Michigan, they travel down the Illinois, Mississippi, Ohio, Cumberland, Tennessee and Tombigbee rivers to the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way, they pass crabbers working Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, anchor beneath the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, glide past barges on the Mississippi River and watch divers harvesting sea sponges in the waters off Tarpon Springs, Fla. (pop. 21,003).

"The Everglades were just beautiful. We saw egrets standing on cypress logs," Peggy recalls. "When we passed Cumberland Island in Georgia, the wild horses would come to eat the exposed green marsh grasses at low tide."

While the ever-changing scenery keeps them reaching for their camera, one of the best parts of the trip for the Leveretts is meeting other boaters along the route. Flying at the prow of Southern Comfort is a flag identifying them as members of America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association, which is an open-arm invitation for friendship with some of the organization's 4,400 members.

### **Joining the Loop**

America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association was founded in 1999 by Ron and Eva Stob of Greenback, Tenn. (pop. 954), after they took a hiatus from their teaching and hospital jobs, completed the Loop in 1994 and published an entertaining account of their trip in a book, *Honey, Let's Get a Boat*.

"Seeing America from the water's edge is a unique experience," says Ron, 75. "You're looking at the unadulterated and natural."

As the Stobs promoted their book at boating events around the country, they found people eager to learn more about traveling the Great Loop, which led to creation of the association and its first rendezvous, a potluck dinner in Grand Haven, Mich. (pop. 11,168), in 2001.

Members include people who don't yet own a boat, but yearn to cruise the Great Loop some day, as well as experienced boaters with a "BaccaLooperate" degree bestowed by the association upon completion of the trip.

Three times a year, members of America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association rendezvous to socialize and share valuable tips about what tools to pack, how to travel with pets, and weather conditions along the journey.

"You don't want to get to the Erie Canal until June because of snow and runoff," says Steve Kromer, 71, of Seabrook Island, S.C. (pop. 1,250), the association's membership director. "And you need to get off Lake Michigan by September 15 because the winds blow and it's cold."

Preparing for the Great Loop trip involves a boatload of planning. The most common boat used is a trawler between 30 and 45 feet long. Smaller boats are too cramped for living on board, while larger vessels can't negotiate the sharp bends in rivers and canals. Boats can't have more than a 6-foot draft and must be able to pass under a fixed 19.1-foot-high railroad bridge on the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal.

The average cost for the cruise—fuel, dockage fees, repairs, food, insurance—is \$45,000, but boaters can save money by anchoring offshore and preparing their own meals onboard, says Janice Kromer, 59, executive director of the America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association.

### **Sightseeing expedition**

Some Great Loop cruisers sell their homes and belongings before they start their journey, while others complete the route in sections over a period of years. Common to all is a sense of adventure and a longing to see more of America.

"The best part is the scenery that you don't get from a car," says Gracie Hatten, 61, a pharmacist from Lakeway, Texas (pop. 8,002), who with her husband, David, 71, a retired Air Force fighter pilot, embarked on their sightseeing expedition in February aboard the Carry Forward.

From the boat deck, Gracie photographs lighthouses, beachfront mansions and shorelines forested with trees draped in Spanish moss. Armed with binoculars and a field guide to birds, she and David identify a parade of seabirds along the way.

The Hattens also spend some time on routine chores, such as hosing off the boat's muddy anchor, filling the fuel tanks and tending a miniature herb garden. "I do a lot of cooking and you've got to have fresh basil for

Italian cooking," Gracie says.

In the evenings, David charts their course for the next day, though he isn't in any rush to return home. "If I had my choice, I'd just keep going," he says.

That sentiment is shared by many of the cruisers on the Great Loop.

"It's not a race," says Steve Kromer. "It's a take-your-time-and-smell-the-roses trip."

Story by Marti Attoun, contributing editor.




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