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REFLECTIONS ON ANOTHER SAILING SEASON

One Conn. couple extends the summer by cruising south to Chesapeake Bay and one of their favorite cities

By Virginia Palmer-Skok

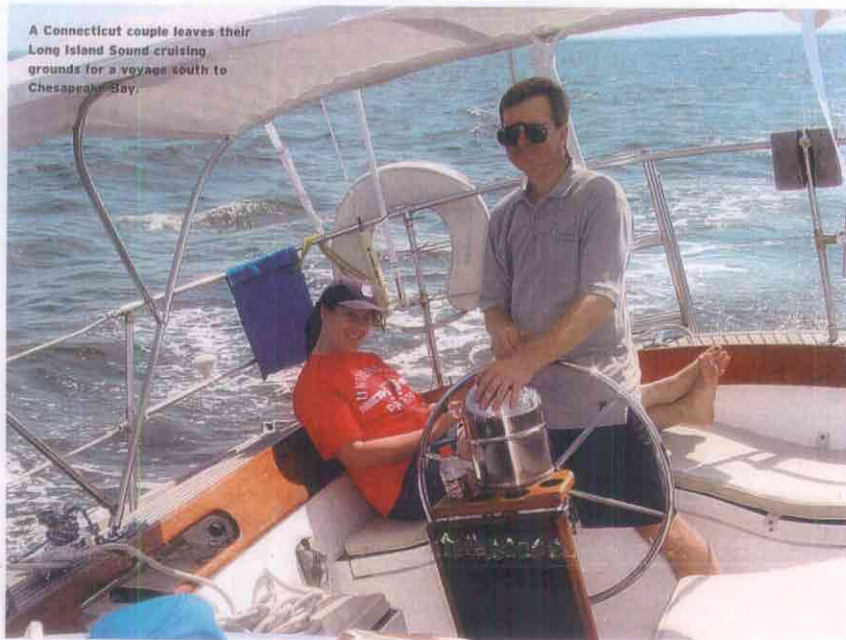
As residents of Connecticut, my husband, crew and I try to extend the sailing season by keeping our boat on Chesapeake Bay most Septembers. That entails an annual voyage departing Labor Day weekend from Long Island Sound to the sailing capital of the world, Annapolis.

The city holds a special place in our hearts as we got married there on our boat a few years back. For me, prior to this trip, I felt both like a child in anticipating Christmas, as well as the parent rushing to get all the presents under the tree for the holiday.

Getting under way

Like every year, getting ready for this past season's voyage was a lot of work. Boxes and boxes had to be put away, including water, warm clothes and freezer food. Since we were going to be more than 100 miles offshore at times, we diligently make sure all necessary provisions are on board, including medical kits, overboard beacons, EPIRBs, foul weather gear and water. I have found that fresh salt air also creates a hunger that necessitates Twinkies and Italian ice for every evening.

At about 4 p.m., my husband, Andy, two friends and my Siamese cat, Mignon, were ready to take off from the Housatonic Boat Club in Stratford, Conn. The five of us all looked at the dock with both anticipation and some anxiety, but when the steward threw our lines back to us on the deck of



A Connecticut couple leaves their Long Island Sound cruising grounds for a voyage south to Chesapeake Bay.

Jenny Beth — our 44-foot, Perry-designed Cheoy Lee cutter — we knew there was no turning back.

As we left, the fog was as dense as pea soup. With each pull, Andy made the sail climb the mast. A loud rustling of canvas was heard, then a snap to signify

that we were finally under full sail on our trip. We sailed several hours on Long Island Sound without seeing much. A boat named Estrella radioed out a friendly hello as we passed each other without even a glimpse. My husband repeatedly went below deck to check the

radar. It is times like this, when all you can see are radar blips and fog, that Channel 16 — the Coast Guard's monitoring station — is closely listened to.

Typically this journey lasts between four and five days, sailing around the clock all but one night. Even though we

had decided two people: up the first ment. We s reaching Mo was just com offshore to I Chesapeake and the Ch Canal. None e the notorious City (the area reason after a route around

Finding our

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When we v our sailing kit the cockpit. / of money on ter, a leash, et sat stationary these accesso happier soaki teak seats in tl

As the sun i some my po: chef and we. Cooking on a ing stove tak every season. burn from a gi a trip around charter. Happ of this experi warm meal o dumplings. V cockpit and er air dining ex horizon from was greeted w in the sails.

Keeping wat

Night Two : four hours th spent sleeping captain's galley utes. Safety-fo he jumped ou utes to check ien to the Coas to the navigati cut, had to be i middle of char lying halfway was time to: " deck, I questi agreeing to a nightly sleep de

That negativ minutes as I s: dark night sky cities, I searche constellations a Cassiopeia an sound of the sa

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had decided to do four-hour shifts of two people and a cat, everyone stayed up the first night, buoyed by excitement. We sailed through the night reaching Montauk, N.Y., when the sun was just coming up. We planned to sail ashore to Delaware, then toward the Chesapeake by way of Delaware Bay, and the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. None of us wanted to go through the notorious Hell Gate in New York City (the area didn't get the name for no reason after all) so we sailed the easterly route around Long Island.

Finding our rhythm

The first whole day was wonderful, lots of breeze and many sails dotting the distance. Time was fluid as no watches were checked; only positions of the sun mattered. A high sun meant it was lunchtime; a grumbling stomach called for one of many snacks. One morning while silently slipping through the seas off the coast of the New Jersey shore, a pod of dolphins raced with the boat off the bow.

When we were under way we kept our sailing kitty either below deck or in the cockpit. After spending a tidy sum of money on cat accoutrements, a halter, a leash, etc., we found that she just sat stationary and gave us silly looks in these accessories. She always is much happier soaking up the sun on warmed teak seats in the cockpit.

As the sun started to set, I had to resume my position as the designated chef and went below to the galley. Cooking on a rolling sea with a swinging stove takes some getting used to every season. I still wear the mark of a burn from a ginger chicken incident on a trip around the BVIs on a bareboat charter. Happily, there was no repeat of this experience on this trip, only a warm meal of fresh beef stew with dumplings. We all sat down in the cockpit and enjoyed the ultimate open-air dining experience, well over the horizon from any land mass. Dessert was greeted with not even a puff of air in the sails.

Keeping watch

Night Two seemed too short. The four hours that were supposed to be spent sleeping with my husband in the captain's galley seemed to last five minutes. Safety-focused person that he is, he jumped out of bed every five minutes to check on the outside crew, listen to the Coast Guard channel and run to the navigation table. Mignon, our sail cat, had to be moved each time off the middle of charts, her favorite position laying halfway over the edge. When it was time to "wake up" and get on deck, I questioned my intelligence at agreeing to a vacation that included nightly sleep deprivation.

That negativity lasted a whole five minutes as I saw stars gleaming in a dark night sky away from the glow of cities. I searched for all of my favorite constellations and stars: Orion's dagger, Cassiopeia and the Big Dipper. The sound of the sails in the wind and the



waves were what every sailor yearns to hear when sitting at an office job. The halyards banged the mast, creating a sound like a wind chime that had many times provided a lullaby when moored. I held a microwaved cup of Java in

Mignon, their sail cat, has a favorite spot on the nav table.

my hands and watched my husband at the wheel as we heeled in the newly found wind, going 10 knots at times. I was reminded again of the different experience sailing at night provides.

'Life's little pleasure'

Morning Three began with my husband's special, "Andy omelets."

Morning dew on the teak decks was used to wipe down the grit and grime of sailing the whole day before. The day passed without any stress except

for when we had to pass oil freighters in the shipping lanes. A 44-foot boat might seem large to some, but near a tanker it felt as if it was a sunfish in the middle of the ocean. I never told my fellow travelers, but every time we passed one and waved to an international crew I said a little prayer that the radar detectors actually worked.

The day was exceptionally hot and the Bimini provided little comfort. Eighty miles off the coast I searched our newly repaired freezer for Italian ice. To my happiness, I found that the freezer did indeed provide us with one of life's little pleasures. Dangling my

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feet in the water when the boat heels, a lemon ice in my hand is pure heaven as the cool ocean water refreshes every inch of your body.

The final leg

Anxiety rose some as we were getting ready to enter the infamous Chesapeake and Delaware Canal that connects the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays. A German freighter from Hamburg slowed down behind us as depth prevented us from pulling out of its way. Parts of the canal are shallow and our boat has a draft of 6 feet, 6

inches. Our German friends followed us for the next half-hour until there was deeper water for us to move to, allowing them to pass.

On the fourth day we decided to take a break and dock in Chesapeake City. As the boat was fully at rest, we broke out the cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, and put a Jimmy Buffet CD into the player. Hors d'oeuvres never taste as good on land as they do on a boat after several hard days (and nights) of sailing.

Day Five was bittersweet as we sailed into Annapolis, past the public moorings in front of the Naval Academy and waited for the drawbridge to open to get

into Spa Creek so we could dock at Petrinis Marina. After scrubbing down salt-encrusted decks and bodies, then resetting all the stuff that had been jostled on the journey, it was time for a tall, cool drink and seafood in the sailing capital of the world.

Taking the dinghy into "Ego Alley" (so named for those who build up their egos by promenading their vessels along City Dock) for a bite and a brew is always a joy. My husband first looks for other Cheoy Lees, then settles on looking at anything that has a mast and all associated boating paraphernalia.

The reward

The ancient Middletown Tavern has been running since the town was a busy port for trading including goods and slaves. Up the hill you can see the state capital, and the Maryland Inn where the Treaty of Paris was signed, ending the Revolutionary War. Annapolis once served as the nation's capital.

Here, everything is no more than a stone's throw away from the resting mariner. Every morning we made our sojourn to the city dock to eat bagels with fresh cheeses from the Big Cheese store in the market building and grab a coffee at Starbucks where we'd people- and dog-watch.

At night the drill was the same except we'd go for Anchor Steam beer with fresh oysters and mussels at McGarvey's saloon. We love the place so much that we held our rehearsal dinner for our wedding upstairs at the saloon.

A word of advice for those pondering a similar cruise: it's best to call ahead. Even though there are public moorings



THE JOURNEY'S END - Motoring into "Ego Alley" toward City Dock; the view from City Dock up Main Street to the Annapolis city capital.



Jenny Beth is a 44-foot Perry-designed Cheoy Lee cutter.

and city dock slips, they fill up pretty quickly. Since they are first-come-first-served, timing is everything. Other locations to stay that we have had pleasant experiences with are Mears Marina and Port Annapolis in Eastport, or the Annapolis Yacht Club or Petrinis in Annapolis proper. ■

Both Virginia Palmer-Skok and Andy Skok are professional marketing people. Their preferred cruising destinations include Port Jefferson, N.Y., Branford, Conn., Three Mile Harbor and off the Hamptons on Long Island's southeastern shore.

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