

Preparing for a Long River Cruise



WyLaWay rests at the West Haverstraw Marina in New York, on the Hudson River.

By Captain Lawrence A. Martin

I began cruising after ninth grade in an elegant wooden boat: an 18-foot Old Town wood-and-canvas canoe. Our Boy Scout troop paddled rivers and lakes in northern Wisconsin for 10 days. I was hooked. During high school, I taught canoeing and rowing at a YMCA summer camp. When my wife and I moved to Minneapolis for graduate school, we bought a Sawyer fiberglass cruising canoe to use in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and Quetico Provincial Park.

Our next “cruise boat” was a 14-foot bass boat we bought from a relative for \$1,000. In 1990, my 11-year-old son, wife and I traveled from St. Paul to Dubuque, Iowa, in it — 270 or

so miles in six days. We camped on islands and had such a good time that we invested in a new 19-foot Four Winns runabout with a custom canvas camper top. We had protection

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against sun and rain, and a boat for skiing and wakeboarding. We used it for 13 seasons — cruising as far south as Keokuk, Iowa.

Fuel costs are a big concern for long-distance cruisers these days.

The late Bob Reib, author of the Skipper Bob guidebooks to the Great Loop cruise, said, “Don’t buy the biggest boat you can afford. Buy the smallest boat in which you can be comfortable.”

We now cruise in a 1999 Rosborough, a 25-foot sedan cruiser we bought in 2003. It is a traditional North Atlantic trawler built in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and powered by twin four-stroke, high-thrust, 50-horsepower Yamaha outboards. I saw one of these trawlers for the first time in 2000 while vacationing in Florida. I researched it on the Internet and followed the used Rosborough market for over a year before taking the plunge. Rosboroughs are so sturdy

and seaworthy that the Canadian government uses them in its Coast Guard and Fisheries Department.

We named this beautiful boat *WyLaWay* — after our names, Wynn and Larry. *WyLaWay* is relatively small, but perfect for us. It's bigger on the inside than on the outside. We initially wanted a cabin on the water: an affordable, seaworthy, long-distance cruiser — salty, comfortable, with good fuel economy. We wanted a boat we could use in almost any weather and could pull on a trailer, to extend our cruising options.

I'm thankful to have a cruising partner who loves it as much as I do. Wynn has become a dependable and safe pilot. It is great to have an able first mate to read the charts, keep the boat off the lock walls, help with navigation and share the piloting.

The Great Loop

In February 2005, Wynn and I begin planning and preparing for a trip we had long talked about — the "Great Loop," circumnavigating the eastern United States and Canada.

We began our Great Loop about seven months later, at Hastings, Minn., on September 22, 2005, and returned 51 weeks later, putting over 7,000 miles safely under our keel.

We headed down the Mississippi to the Ohio River, Cumberland River, Barkley Canal, and up the Tennessee River to the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway (Tenn-Tom). We traveled the Tenn-Tom to Mobile, Ala., then followed the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway east to the Florida Panhandle. We struck out across 90 miles of open water in the Gulf of Mexico on New Year's Eve day to Steinhatchee, in Florida's "armpit," then turned south to the Keys. Then we headed up the East Coast via the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway to Manasquan, N.J., and out into the Atlantic Ocean for the final 40 to 50 miles into New York Harbor.

We took the Hudson River to the Erie Canal, to the Oswego Canal to the east end of Lake Ontario. We crossed 60 miles of Lake Ontario to Kingston, Ontario, on June 28, 2006, then headed west via the Trent-Severn Waterway to Georgian Bay on the east



Wynn and Larry celebrate the evening before closing the loop on Labor Day 2006 at Grafton, Ill.

side of Lake Huron. Then through the Small Boat Channel, among 30,000 rocky islands of Georgian Bay to the North Channel and past Mackinac Island to Mackinaw City, Mich., where we were weathered in for about four days.

Then we crossed about 80 miles of Lake Michigan to Door County,

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Wis., and down the west side of the lake to Chicago. Lake Michigan was the roughest water we encountered on the whole cruise. We spent two days "weathered in" for every day we could comfortably and safely be out on the lake.

We cruised through downtown Chicago on the Chicago River and down the Illinois Waterway to Grafton, Ill., where the Illinois River enters the Mississippi River. Here, on Labor Day 2006, we "closed the Loop" — having circumnavigated a very large "island," the eastern third of the United States.

We took two weeks to cruise the final 596 miles from Grafton to Hastings.

Planning & Preparing

When we started preparing for our grand adventure, our list soon grew to more than 200 items. Planning a cruise is as simple as writing your list. Preparing for the cruise is considerably harder. Planning a menu is not the same as preparing the meal.

We decided to sell the house and put our life in storage. We had cars to store and furniture to give away. We had decades of business paperwork to shred and a dearly beloved dog whose health began to fail. Sadly, Augie Doggie passed away in August and never went to shore in the new dinghy we bought for him.

We took a Safe Boating course from the St. Paul Chapter of the U.S. Power and Sail Squadron. We also took Red Cross first aid and CPR/Automatic Electric Defibrillation (AED) courses. A year later I repeated the first aid/AED courses for my captain's license, and 10 hours later I found one of my best friends semi-conscious in a life-threatening situation. I used my fresh first aid training to check stroke symptoms before I dialed 911.

On Day One of our 7,000 mile Great Loop cruise, we asked a worker at Lock 5A how to get behind Latsch Island at Winona, Minn., to anchor for the night. He told us to cross on the upstream end into the back channel. We did, and we hit a closing dam that wasn't on the chart. We studied the chart, backed off the rocks,



Larry fuels the boat at Hoppie's Marine Service, downriver from St. Louis.

went around the downstream end of the island and entered the anchorage safely above the wing dam there. Fortunately, the boat was not damaged. Lesson 1: make sure the guy you ask for "local knowledge" knows what he is talking about. Lesson 2: in skinny water, double-check the chart

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before you head in, then take soundings with a lead line and approach cautiously. Lesson 3: if we hadn't been so tired and excited about starting the trip, we might have used more caution finding our first night's anchorage.

The two most essential river cruise planning tools are the Army Corps of Engineers' river charts and *Quimby's Cruising Guide*. *Quimby's* gives essential information about marinas, and locks and dams, their addresses, phone numbers and mile markers; points of interest; and distances on over 9,300 miles of navigable rivers.

You will need up-to-date charts

for every body of water you are not intimately familiar with. When we cruised America's Great Loop, we used over \$2,000 worth of charts and guidebooks, which we bought for half price from a Maine couple who'd recently completed the loop.

In Ft. Myers Beach, Fla., we bought a Garmin chartplotter for about \$600. A chartplotter uses GPS technology to show you exactly where you are on a digital chart. I installed it myself in two to three hours. On the first day, it saved us from making wrong turns three times!

Floating School

Our education continued throughout the trip. There is an especially daunting 250-mile stretch without a marina or fueling station between Hoppie's Marine Service, about 25 miles downriver from St. Louis, and Green Turtle Bay Marina on the Cumberland River. We buddied with a larger boat for safety and were able to leverage the river current to save on fuel. However, we arrived in Paducah, Ky., with a full holding tank and no bathroom open on shore during the night. Lesson 4: a full holding tank is as hard to tolerate as an empty fuel tank!

While boating the Great Loop, we stayed in marinas or at anchor much

of the time. We traveled only about one day in three. We also tried to never cruise more than six hours a day. When you have cruised in the heat and sun for more than six hours, you get tired and become dangerous to yourself and others. We prefer to cruise at 7 to 9 mph, though our boat is capable of 16 or 17 mph.

Before we left, our family doctor predicted: "This year will change you forever."

He was right. We live more simply now. Our condo has less than a third of the space of our former suburban home. We like it better here. We walk to our favorite restaurants, our food co-op, church, coffee shops, the YMCA and bookstores. We work less. We drive less. We worry less.

We kept our Toyota Prius and got rid of our SUV. I ride the bus occasionally. We rent a car when we need a second vehicle. We dress more simply. We are happier.

And we are better mariners. I was proud to be told by a Coast Guard enlisted man that our boat is "very well-found" (well-equipped and safe), and "you are people we won't have to go looking for in the night." He saluted me. I choked up, eyes moist.

So, go cruising as soon as you can. Prepare. Know your limits. Know your boat's limits. You are your brothers' and sisters' keeper. Maintain a safe amount of water around you and beneath you — and no water above you. Be safe! 🌊 🚤

Captain Larry Martin lives in St. Paul. He is interested in your questions about river cruising. Email him at Lawrence.martin@mac.com or call him at (612) 360-1027.

Photos courtesy of Larry and Wynn Martin.

Visit www.big-river.com for links to resources for cruising the river, and excerpts from the Martin's Great Loop planning list.