



Leaving THE COLD IN YOUR wake

BOATERS FOLLOW THE SUN SOUTH TO
FLORIDA DOWN THE INTRACOASTAL
WATERWAY, THE EASTERN
SEABOARD'S SCENIC
"WATER HIGHWAY"

by Glenn Swift

Photograph by Rob Downey



When the leaves start to fall and the night air begins to chill, thousands of boaters north of the Mason-Dixon Line instinctively know it's time to follow the sun and head south – time to leave the cold in their wake. Every year, yachts of all kinds – sailboats, trawlers, cruisers, motor sailers, tugs – follow the winding path of the magnificent Intracoastal Waterway (ICW), the Eastern Seaboard's scenic "water highway." Wise captains try to time their voyage so they reach the Chesapeake by the end of September, just in time to catch the fall foliage and enjoy the Annapolis boat shows. The rest of the journey south usually begins by mid-October so that the bulk of the hurricane season has safely passed.

Many South Florida "snowbirds" make their annual winter migration in this way. Capt. Mike McLaughlin is just such a veteran skipper who began cruising the length of the ICW some 25 years ago. The congenial captain was eager to share his experiences. "When I first started making the trip in the late '70s, there were stretches when you could go days without seeing another boat. It's not that way today. Sometimes there are so many boats on the 'ditch' (boaters' jargon for the ICW) that you have to be very careful."

The dramatic increase in the number of boats in recent years has far outpaced the growth in the number of marinas. "Finding a slip at a reasonable price is not always easy, and prices vary dramatically. It's a simple matter of what the traffic will bear," said McLaughlin. In general, the more exclusive areas (e.g., Newport, Rhode Island or Beaufort, South Carolina) are the most expensive, but this is not always the case. "I've been on some of the most rural stretches of the Intracoastal and paid Palm Beach prices. That's why it's important to have a general idea of where you'll be docking overnight and speak to those with experience. It's even more important if you find yourself in need of repairs. There are 'pirates' out there," McLaughlin said with a chuckle.

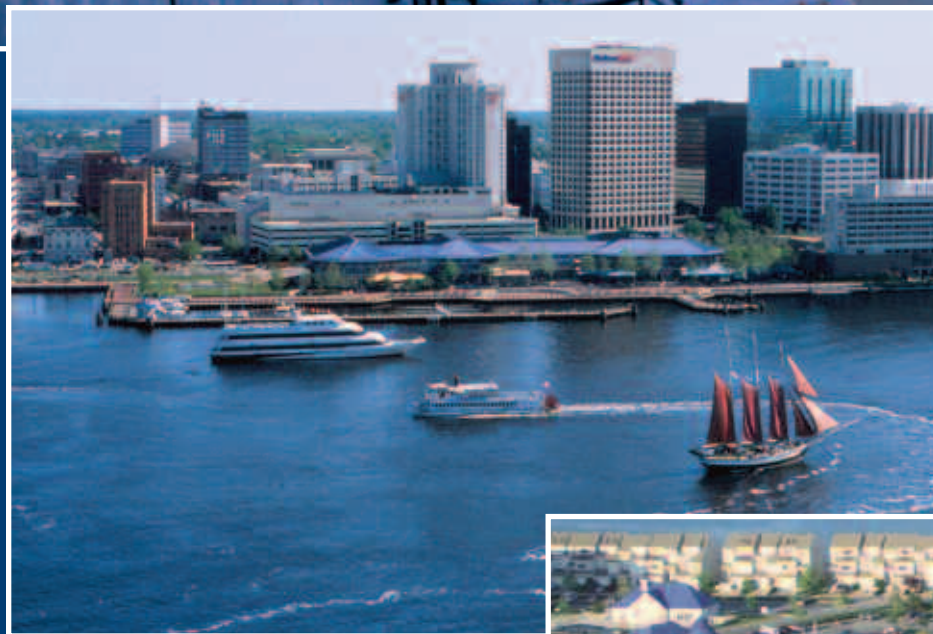
Foreboding aside, Mike is the first to say what an incredible experience "cruising the ditch" can be. "You see America throughout its history, from its colonial beginnings, in places like Georgetown, South Carolina, to its most modern when cruising the Long Island Sound." Mike is not one who stresses speed when making the journey. "There is so much to see and so many interesting places to visit that are right off the ICW in its numerous connecting bays and rivers ... you miss a lot by cruising too fast. I like to take the time to explore the nooks and crannies of the ditch."

No doubt you can read in many a cruising magazine about the captain who averaged 14 knots for eight hours a day and made it from Norfolk to Palm Beach in 10 days. But to take advantage of what the ICW has to offer, a month or so is needed. "How many people realize that downtown Washington, D.C. is fully accessible from the Intracoastal?" McLaughlin asked rhetorically.

That so many places are accessible to the ICW is not entirely an act of nature. Alarmed at the vulnerability of U.S. shipping to submarine warfare following World War I, in 1919, Congress authorized the dredging of the toll-free waterway to a minimum depth of 12 feet (mean low water) to provide a sheltered passage for commercial shipping. Since that time, the Army Corps of Engineers has maintained the ICW, which stretches from Maine to Key West on the Atlantic Coast, all the way to Brownsville, Texas on the Gulf of Mexico. The Corps is also responsible for making sure that many miles of navigable waterways (the Hudson River, New York Barge Canal, Chesapeake Bay, Savannah River, Apalachicola River and the entire Mississippi River system) are accessible from the ICW.

Don't be misled by the "official" 12-foot depth. With all due respect to the Army Corps of Engineers, there are many stretches of the ditch where the channel is just six to seven feet deep. Thanks to a wave of hurricanes that pounded the Carolina coast in the late '90s, and a lack of federal funding, the Corps has not been able to keep pace with Mother Nature. Further complicating matters are the numerous "mini-channels" providing access to marinas along the ICW; these are often barely five feet in depth. Therefore, the first bit of advice is not to attempt the trip with a boat having a draft greater than four feet.

With regard to length, that is not quite so black and white. Although the route consists primarily of natural estuaries, rivers, creeks and man-made cuts, there are several stretches where the water can be, well, downright rough. When cruising through North Carolina's Pimlico and Albermarle sounds, four- to six-foot swells are not uncommon. The Delaware Bay is another place where caution should precede valor. Although there are several particularly attractive rivers connecting to it, extreme roughness has given the bay the reputation for being the worst body of water on the Eastern Seaboard for cruising. Conditions are especially difficult whenever winds and currents oppose each other. So how big should your boat be? "I think 30 feet is a good, safe size," said McLaughlin, who also added, "but anything over 60 can be very difficult to handle, even



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for an experienced captain, in some of the ‘shoaly’ parts of the ditch, especially where there are swift currents.”

With regard to navigational aids, most experienced “ditch cruisers” prefer a combination of paper and electronic charts, in addition to a Global Positioning System (GPS). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) charts are among the most popular of the “old-fashioned” variety. These, and a broad selection of books and guides for both recreational and professional mariners, can be downloaded at the American Nautical Services Web site (www.amnautical.com). As for the high tech end of things, Nobeltec’s Visual Series and Furuno’s Chart Plotter with C-Map NT+ cartridges are clear favorites. Remember though, all charts have errors. The ICW is an ever-changing seascape with shoals shifting constantly. Compounding the problem of the shifting sands is the ever-present problem of missing markers and buoys. More and more of these are being damaged and knocked loose by careless, and sometimes reckless, boaters. “Watch out for the ‘weekend water warriors,’” McLaughlin cautioned. “It’s not uncommon to see boats traveling at 60 mph. At that speed, it is very easy to lose control. Everyone on the Intracoastal constantly needs to be on the lookout.”

Now that you know what size your boat should be and what the essential navigational aids are, let’s go cruising!

After attending the renowned Annapolis boat shows, it’s time to pull up anchor and head south. The first thing to remember is that the Chesapeake Bay is home to many large oceangoing vessels, so keep an eye out for those 10,000-ton freighters. As you approach Norfolk, bear in mind that you are approaching the largest naval base in the world. Unlike just a few years ago when you could get so close that you could reach out and practically touch an aircraft carrier or two, these are the days of post-9/11. There are gun boats everywhere now at all naval installations. You need to steer clear of any approaching naval vessels. Warnings aside, the Hampton Roads area is fascinating to visit with excellent anchorage at Fort Monroe and Old Point Comfort Yacht Club. You can visit the historic fort and spend the night at the classy Chamberlin Hotel, a prominent local landmark. The Waterside Marketplace in downtown Norfolk offers a number of excellent eateries.

Heading south toward the Carolinas, the most popular way of passage is the “Dismal Swamp Canal Route.” Don’t be scared off by the name. Located between ICW Mile Markers 44 and 51, the canal will bring you into the antebellum town of Elizabeth City. The charm here is with the

local greeters (called “Rose Buddies”) who present flowers to the ladies, and entertain all with wine and cheese at 5:00 p.m. There are several restaurants and marinas on the local waterfront, and a good old fashioned downtown is just a short distance away. The Marina Restaurant, immediately adjacent to the Pelican Marina, features some great Southern-style cookin’. There are several free 48-hour slips, so you might get lucky.

After you’ve had your fill of quaint Elizabeth City, another intriguing Carolina town just off the Pimlico River is Bath (Mile Marker 147), a favorite of Mike’s. “This is one of those neat side trips off the ICW that is really worthwhile. Bath is the hometown of the legendary pirate Blackbeard, and the locals are eager to share their history.” The Bath Harbor Marina and Motel (which includes an excellent restaurant) is a favorite for overnighters.

Continuing through the often-rough Pimlico Sound, you may wish to stop at another popular North Carolina destination, Beaufort (Mile Marker 204). Pronounced “boofert,” this town has become a major boating center due to its excellent access to the Atlantic Ocean. The most popular anchorage is at the town front, which includes a dinghy dock. The exquisite downtown offers a wide variety of restaurants and specialty shops. Note: If you’re in need of fuel as you proceed south, stop at the New River Marina (Mile 246) – word is they offer the cheapest diesel fuel anywhere on the ditch.

When you’ve reached Mile Marker 340, you have crossed into the “Palmetto State,” known to most as South Carolina. Typically, the first stop is ritzy Myrtle Beach. Here you won’t have to worry if you can use your American Express card. This town is loaded with first-class restaurants, shopping and lodging – all are a mere stone’s throw from the ditch. Surprisingly, the 1,000-foot floating dock is free for 48-hours. Many say jokingly that Myrtle Beach has the most expensive free docking in the world! One serious word of caution, the current is very strong and a shoal extends into the ICW from the north end of the pier.

If you haven’t run out of money, 50 miles south is the pristine, colonial town of Georgetown (Mile Marker 403). This nearly perfect little town, the third oldest in South Carolina, is a “can’t afford to miss,” according to McLaughlin. There is excellent anchorage off one of the most unspoiled waterfronts anyone could imagine. There are several sidewalk cafes in the adjacent downtown, and the townsfolk abound with southern hospitality. The River Room Restaurant offers excellent food at moderate prices.



info

www.waterwayguide.com

Probably the most comprehensive Web site with information on everything from nautical maps to the best marinas.

www.americanboating.org

This Web site has a collection of articles from boaters who have made the trip in recent years, and what they find most interesting and helpful.

www.seatape.com

Another Web site with assorted information about "cruising the ditch."

www.floridatravelusa.com

This is a "must" Web site for Florida boaters and includes a great deal of information on the ICW.



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THE FINAL DESTINATION OF
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OFTEN VERO BEACH. ALSO
KNOWN AS "VELCRO
BEACH," VERO BEACH
ATTRACTS MANY A SNOW-
BIRD (SOME PERMANENTLY)
BECAUSE OF ITS REPUTATION
AS BEING ONE OF THE LAST
REMAINING JEWELS ON
FLORIDA'S EAST COAST.

Photograph by Rob Downey

After you've been able to pull yourself away from Georgetown, historic Charleston Harbor is another "must see" on the ICW. Located at Mile Marker 469, Charleston is history personified. With a number of Colonial-period and Civil War landmarks, the pedestrian-oriented waterfront is an ideal place to spend a couple of days. The Ashley Marina offers excellent dockage and a shuttle bus to all of the historic attractions. If you're a fish lover, be sure to check Hyman's – recently voted the best seafood restaurant in South Carolina. Keep in mind however, the current can be swift.

Seventy miles south (as the crow flies) lies the scenic town of Beaufort (pronounced "byoo-fert"), South Carolina – not to be confused with somewhere else you might remember. This Beaufort is home to Parris Island, a symbol of our nation's military might. The historic town preserves plantation-style elegance, coupled with modern luxury. In recent years, Beaufort has become a favorite locale for many Hollywood movies, due to its superb architecture and untouched natural beauty. The Ladies Island Marina is the most popular since the Downtown Marina does not permit overnight docking. The Beaufort Inn, located just a few blocks from the harbor, has an excellent restaurant with a diverse cuisine.

Crossing into Georgia, "The Peach State," a popular stopping point is Jekyll Island (Mile Marker 684). Although there is no overnight dockage, you can anchor for less than \$10 and use the dinghy dock. The island features a number of spectacular vistas, and there are bicycle paths around the entire island.

As you continue south you will pass King's Bay (Mile Marker 708). This is a particularly challenging section of the Intracoastal to navigate due to the channel being very poorly marked. Compounding matters is the nearby nuclear submarine base. Often it is necessary to stay outside of the narrow channel to avoid any possible confrontations with the subs.

Immediately south of King's Bay is Cumberland Island (Mile Marker 710), another favorite for nature lovers. Cumberland is a national park and an excellent place to spend the day. (JFK, Jr. was married here.) There is no available overnight dockage however, and most boaters choose to pull into Fernandina Beach, Florida, just another six miles south.

Fernandina has become a popular stop for boaters ever since the restoration of the historic downtown area a decade ago. Although a particularly quaint and interesting place,

boaters need to proceed with caution. The water depth at the municipal marina is very shallow on the south side. In a northeast wind, you might be better off skipping Fernandina altogether. On the bright side, the old town abuts the marina and there are plenty of shops and restaurants; the Down Under is a local favorite.

Next on our journey is another "must see" – America's oldest city, St. Augustine (Mile Marker 774). If you like history, St. Augustine has a little bit of everything – even a castle! The "old town" represents one of the most fascinating pedestrian-oriented shopping areas anywhere. Be sure to dine at Fiddler's Green (named after an old seafaring term used to describe a sailor's paradise), arguably the best restaurant in town. If you're fascinated by the past, you'll be spellbound by St. Augustine.

Don't worry, navigating the ditch when leaving the old city is relatively easy. Despite numerous sandbars in the harbor, the channel is deep and extremely well marked. You don't need to be Sir Frances Drake to find your way out.

The final leg of the journey brings us to one of the last remaining jewels on Florida's east coast, Vero Beach. Located at Mile Marker 945, Vero has been given the name "Velcro Beach" by many a snowbird – Velcro because so many come for a night or two and end up staying for months. The local municipal marina is considered one of the finest on the Eastern Seaboard.

A popular dock of choice, Vero Beach Municipal Marina is a fully modern operation with a large laundry facility and a highly competent staff. A free shuttle bus leaves the marina every hour and will take you anywhere in town. For more information on Vero Beach Municipal Marina, go to page 104 and read about *Coastal Boating's* "Boater of the Month," Bill Eastman. Bill has been at the helm of the marina since 1997.

In Vero Beach, you will find some of the most elegant boutiques and fine dining establishments in South Florida. Captain Mike can attest to the town's Velcro characteristic. He pulled up for an overnight stay nine years ago and has been calling Vero Beach home ever since.

By this time, the sweaters have been neatly packed away, and the cold long since left in the wake. For most snowbirds who migrate south via the Intracoastal, somewhere between Vero Beach and Key West marks the final destination of a more than 1,000-mile voyage – a truly amazing journey that winds through the heart and soul of America, offering echoes of its past, and glimpses into its future. ♪