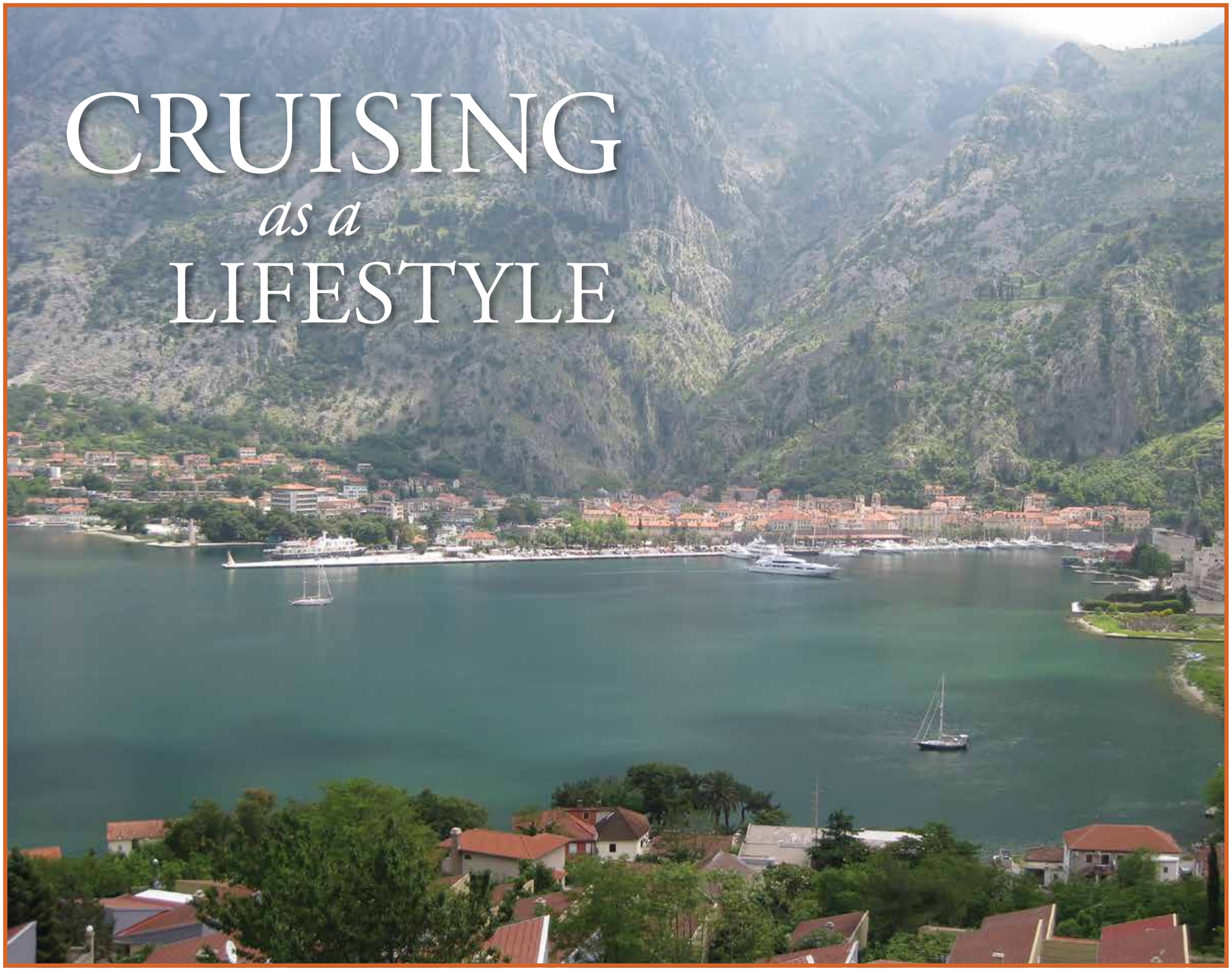
CRUISING *as a* LIFESTYLE



by Dick Stevenson, New York Station

CRUISING is a wide-ranging term and many variations of wandering by boat fit under its umbrella. In this article, I offer thumbnail sketches of the various styles of cruising and elaborate on what a "lifestyle" of cruising looks like—a style with perhaps the fewest participants among sailors, but where one may reap rich rewards. Special attention is paid to the personal demands that cruising can command. In conclusion, I sketch out the path my wife, Ginger, and I took to embarking on this cruising journey.

A WORD OF WARNING

For the past 17 years, our 40-foot sailboat has been our primary home. For the first 12 years, we lived aboard full-time, and in the past five years, we have been six months on and six months off. We are closing in on 70,000 miles under our keel and have visited over 40 countries by boat. This style of living has made possible our sustained immersion in personal interests and pursuits. We are emphatically not looking for daring-do on the high seas, adrenalin rushes, and accomplishments of the "oh wow" variety; quite the opposite, in fact, as that kind of cruising is not sustainable over time. It's about a way of living where our interests—history, culture, nature, people, sailing (of course), and learning about new and different ways of living well in this world—are front and center. Drama and adventure, which do occur, are artifacts of living a rich, active life on the sea that is bound to have surprises. We love to sail and we love to travel, and we love our own pillow at night and our own mug of tea in the morning—and so, although we did not actually plan it, cruising became a lifestyle.

Left: You get the freedom to anchor in places like Kotor, Montenegro.
Top: "Office" work—the author at the computer.

VARIATIONS ON THE CRUISING LIFE

There are numerous ways to go cruising on a sailboat—and, more recently, on wide-ranging recreational power vessels. To many people, completing a *circumnavigation* is considered the holy grail of cruising. Some go slowly and relish a long voyage, a very few keep going around and around, while others settle in an area discovered en route. But most consider this accomplishment an interlude, much like climbing Mount Everest: a period of time, a chunk of finances, and a good deal of energy is set aside to accomplish this impressive task before a return to land-based pursuits and more episodic cruising.

Expedition cruising is by definition time-limited and goal-oriented and plays a close second to circumnavigating in the interest, press, and accolades it receives. Good examples of this would be doing the Northwest Passage, sailing to Svalbard, or doubling Cape Horn.

Sabbatical cruisers choose to live on their boat full-time for a year or two in order to accomplish a goal, such as spending a season in the Caribbean.

Periodic/vacation cruisers carve out a few weeks or months each season and then return to their land base, often leaving their boat in wonderful cruising grounds and returning the following year to further explore or move on elsewhere.

Repairs in exotic places—the author rebedding a chain plate.

Perhaps the largest cruising group (and now we are getting to those who may consider their boat their primary residence) are the "*snow birds*" of North America: south for the winter and north in the summer. This can be quite adventurous, with forays into Central America and the northwest Caribbean when south, and the Canadian Maritimes when north. A less demanding approach includes anchorages in Florida or the Bahamas in the winter and the Chesapeake or New England in the summer. This cruising pattern enhances opportunities for regular get-togethers with friends and fellow boaters, embedding one in a large and varied community in generally familiar, safe surroundings with easily available support. Some who live on their boats full-time end up settling in one country or area and "go native"—they learn the language, get residency, and often slip out of cruising mode, although they may still live aboard.

Probably the smallest group with the lowest profile are those whose interests lead them to *cruising as a lifestyle*. They choose to live aboard a boat full-time, wander widely, and follow their interests and see where that takes them, usually with the intention of moving slowly to new and different places. These cruisers have often limited their land-based presence by selling or renting out their house and cars. Sometimes they leave with clear ideas as to what they want to do for a year or two, which might easily change as they settle into their new routine. Some, often single-handers or young couples, weave together a livelihood with their live-aboard life. A number have retired early—our story—to ensure ample time for their cruising pursuits. Then there are those who start post-retirement, hoping to pull off some good years of this occasionally vigorous lifestyle.

BUT FIRST, THERE ARE CHALLENGES

Over the years, in chats with other couples thinking of more extended cruising, a whole list of "*you gottas*" has evolved—caveats, if you will, for couples who live aboard full-time until it is no longer fun or something pulls them away. It is one thing, often exhilarating, to experience challenge and hardship on a time-limited endeavor, where the return to comfort can be a carrot on a stick to spur motivation. It is quite another when those challenges are ongoing, day in and day out—just everyday life, where a formerly engaging problem transforms to an irritant. Then, one's motivation must be strong.

Probably the most important "*you gotta*" is to be on the same page (or close to it) as your partner. Many a cruising life has foundered on differing goals, expectations, or agendas. There needs to be an equality of commitment and responsibility in the decisions that guide your choices. Where one participant is merely a passenger, the cruise is often cut short or doesn't go well.

"Master" bedroom, shared with spinnaker and bedroll.

The galley benefits from creative space allocation.

You gotta like, or learn to like, living in small spaces. *Alchemy*, our Valiant, is 40 feet long on deck and its interior volume is quite a bit smaller than that of contemporary designs. But even large vessels do not have nearly the space which land bases provide. Many a kitchen has more interior space than our entire boat. This is mitigated somewhat by the fact that one often spends a great deal of time outside and one's interests are focused off the boat.

You gotta like intimacy. You are very close all of the time. Far more is shared, and there is little opportunity to get away or be on your own. Privacy is often just not possible. The ironic flip side is that one must also have a tolerance for isolation as there will be times when there are few distractions, social or otherwise, from your partner and the boat.

We are rarely separated by more than 15 feet for days or weeks on end and on offshore passages, we are never more than 40 feet apart. (Our longer passages have generally been just the two of us.) More than a few friends have commented that their marriages would never survive this degree of closeness. I in no way suspect that this implies any flaw or vulnerability in a marriage. Not all couples are comfortable with a high degree of intimacy and isolation, with having one's social eggs in only one basket, and with complete interdependence. On offshore passages, getting a good sleep with your partner on watch is a testament to one's faith in the reliability of your partner. A cruising relationship is not for every couple and takes some getting used to.

You gotta not get upset when long-forgotten—maybe never learned—skills are called upon. Repairs are needed regularly, but there are also more mundane tasks, like dishwashing: for almost two decades, we have handwashed every pot, pan, dish, and glass. Occasionally, one must wash clothes by hand. Both tasks need doing with a minimum of fresh water. Repairs that would, in a former life, generate a call to the plumber, electrician, or building superintendent, now demand your skills and perseverance. And where skills and experience are limited, perseverance becomes very important.

You gotta like "partnering up." Couples may have thought they lived lives of shared decision-making ashore, but the degree of collaboration, the necessity for interdependence, and the dire consequences of poor communication or collaboration make land-based partnering pale by comparison. This was by far the most challenging aspect of our first years on board and was largely unanticipated. Successfully weathered, it brought us greater closeness and strengthened our bond.

You gotta tolerate nearly every activity being significantly more difficult than it was on shore. There is no workshop where all the tools are ready at hand. Spare parts are buried and a challenge to get at, even when you actually remember where they are stored. Often there is time pressure: the refrigeration or toilet is needed. Counter and table space are limited, and consider yourself fortunate if you have a vice and workbench. There is no office, gym, washer, dryer, or bathtub. There is no KitchenAid, lathe, or table saw. Things are done the old-fashioned way, by hand.

You gotta tolerate less contact with family and friends (and their assessment may be that what you are doing is a bit wacko). This separation may be the most potent caveat for many. The flip side, for us, was the unexpected and wonderful making of new friends whom we will be in touch with for the rest of our lives.

You (likely) gotta tolerate some degree of financial insecurity, health insurance uncertainty, and curtailed access to trusted professionals, including doctors, lawyers, and mechanics. Some bases may feel "uncovered." Even adult children benefit from regular contact with their parents—and not only do we have three adult children, but two of our parents were alive when we left and needed occasional attention. Seventeen years ago, this

Sometimes you are isolated and on your own.

Our 40-foot-overall boat length is on the smaller size among U.S. cruising boats. In more than ten years in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe, we met hundreds of U.S.-flagged boats and only very few were smaller than ours. In Northern Europe, U.S. boats were far less common, and the boats of other nationalities were more modest in size. The primary reason we occasionally wished for a larger boat was to have longer legs so we could reach an anchorage before nightfall, but many elements of cruising are made easier by having a modestly sized boat. That said, clearly the trend is toward larger boats.

was far more of an issue, and it's a boon that communication has improved so dramatically. That said, a phone call from another country, across an ocean, feels far different from a phone call from a neighboring town.

You gotta tolerate the possibility—probability if you live this life for a while—of health care that's far different from what you expect in the U.S., taxicabs that would never pass an OSHA inspection, and food that would never meet U.S. safety standards. But you will certainly survive, possibly even thrive, through all of it.

You (likely) gotta be prepared for a bit of a shock that there is still much to learn about cruising, even though you may have been "vacation cruising" for decades.

You gotta get comfortable living with some degree of risk. Most of us do not consider risk when we get on a highway or park the car, but any passage and every anchorage entails a risk assessment. It may sound silly, but one is best served by embracing a chronic low-grade anxiety and wariness. Is the anchorage safe? What is the weather report? How do I reach open water if a midnight bailout is necessary? Things that could go wrong sound a constant background mantra. This wariness and vigilance can be wearying at times, but it is what keeps you, your partner, and your home safe.

You gotta like new things: every anchorage, marina, and town is different. Every new country is a learning experience. We often average 40–70 new harbors a season, and one season we entered 11 countries. Where is the best place to anchor? Is the marina side-tie, Med-moor, or one of the myriad other variations?

You gotta, if you wander widely, tolerate times when internet is limited or nonexistent. Even where coverage exists, you may "pay-as-you-go" and will monitor your usage much as you do water or propane. YouTube and Facebook, with their gigabyte consuming properties, become a choice rather than a given.

You gotta tolerate reinventing the wheel. We need to find 30-plus new supermarkets a year, find where the sugar and tea are shelved in each one, and determine whether it carries our preferred brand of yogurt.

You gotta like—or at least tolerate—making mistakes, such as ending up (surprise!) with horseradish mayonnaise because you can't read the language, let alone the fine print.

You gotta be willing to make real and substantial sacrifices. Those who embark on this life when young are likely sacrificing career-development opportunities and financial security in their older years. Those who leave in middle age, as we did, may sacrifice the full flowering of their careers and growth in their retirement portfolio. Those who wait until retirement age may have limited their cruising life, which is best enjoyed in good physical health and which calls for occasional vigorous activity. I would think that anyone heading down this path will experience some misgivings, financial or otherwise, and ask, "Am I crazy to be doing this?"

One must hold on to the reality that these sacrifices buy time to do exactly what you want, when the restrictions that have governed your life no longer have such powerful sway. This time is a valuable and unpredictably limited resource.

We could have continued working and that would have been fine: a good life. There were absolutely things we left undone. But like many in middle age, we saw a plateauing of the richness and diversity coming into our lives. We were fortunate to have the financial means, although we certainly crossed our fingers during the first few years.

You *do not gotta* have a bucketful of money. We are often asked for specifics: How much is needed? There is some good writing in this area—Beth Leonard's *The Voyager's Handbook: The Essential Guide to Blue Water Cruising* for one—but my answer takes a different form. If you spent overly in your land-based life, you will find ample opportunity to do so while cruising. If you lived within your means on shore, you are likely to take that same wisdom and discipline with you. In other words, handling finances is more a matter of who you are and how you conduct your life than any actual amount.

Most of us could consider the bulk of the above, or even all of the above, as doable, but it is one thing to appraise feasibility within the context of a monthlong holiday or a sabbatical year, and quite another when it becomes every day, month in, month out, year in, year out. This is not a time-limited excursion where you will return home to be snug, warm, showered, and clean after a period in the wilderness.

OUR CRUISING REALITY

Ginger and I are not long-haired, barefoot, bohemian vagabonds who live on the fringes. We did retire from our professional lives early, motivated, in part, by a parent whose life was unexpectedly curtailed in full bloom. We had no wish to take chances on having time for our dreams. A small(ish) boat notwithstanding, we are in no way "camping." We are very comfortable in our everyday lives and, I promise you, we're not stoics. We have a four-burner stove with oven and broiler. We have heat. We have hot water, a freezer and fridge, and a dedicated shower room (albeit the size of a phone booth). We read by electric lights and are comfortable in all aspects of living on the boat, whether at anchor or underway. We have more than the essentials and want for nothing (except possibly space, but in the end, we have found this to be overrated). Most of the irritants, often petty, are softened and ameliorated by the clarity and the awareness that we are traveling to stupendous places, meeting wonderful people, experiencing fascinating cultures, learning history, and seeing amazing sights—all this while returning to our own bed at night and waking to our own mug of tea in the morning. It doesn't get much better.

Some of it is mindset: What we think of as cozy, others might consider cramped. Partly, it is knowing what is personally important (and what is not). I often feel a twinge of annoyance when I must put away a project so we have a table to eat at. But small spaces keep you focused, and that is a good thing.

Strong personal motivations, but not overly firm plans, are a key to success. For example, after we spent two winters in Central America, we decided to head east across the Atlantic rather than west into the Pacific as we had, heretofore, vaguely thought we'd do. Our plans started to shift, unexpectedly, when we found ourselves entranced by the Mayan ruins and their history (to the extent that anyone really knows it). There were palm trees for shade, beaches that we enjoyed, and snorkeling and diving that we loved. But these pleasures started to pale against our fascination with the tales of an ancient world that lay in the jungles of Belize, Mexico, and Guatemala. The Greek and Roman ruins, the pyramids of Egypt, and the overall history of the Mediterranean became a siren call, drowning out the palm trees and sandy beaches of the Pacific. The cradle of our Western world was, more or less, completely accessible in the cruising grounds of the Mediterranean. We set our course east and spent the next decade exploring much of the European coast.

About the Author

Dick Stevenson, a retired clinical psychologist/psychoanalyst, and his wife, Ginger, a former teacher, have made their home aboard their cutter, *Alchemy*, a Valiant 42, for most of the last 17 years. They started with 25 years of cruising the East Coast, from Bermuda to Maine, with their three children. In 2002 they retired, sold the house, and moved aboard full time. They have wandered in Central America, the Bahamas, and parts of the Eastern Caribbean. In 2006 they crossed the North Atlantic with stops in Bermuda and the Azores, and spent several seasons in the Mediterranean. In addition to the usual Med cruising grounds, they were fortunate to sail to Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Egypt. After years in warm climates, they sailed to northern Europe, where they had the joy of sailing as far east as St. Petersburg, Russia, and above the Arctic Circle in Norway. Five years was not nearly enough time for these northern European waters, but being closer to family was beckoning, so a year ago they crossed the North Atlantic by way of the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland before fetching up in Newfoundland, Canada.