



Double Trouble

A multi-generational crew takes on the cruising grounds of Southwest Florida

By Theresa Nicholson



As we pulled out of Hancock Creek and turned south down the Caloosahatchee River, I had my doubts. It was the Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving and we were due at the Sanibel Marina before 5pm, leaving us just a few short hours to cover 20+ miles. An approaching cold front was due at sunset, and the prospect of docking our newly chartered, 50-foot home in a fresh north wind was not sitting easy on my mind. I called the marina and told them we were on our way, but the uncertainty in the manager's voice was not reassuring.

"You're on the river? You have several miles of no wake zone and three bridges before you even get to the bay. It could take you until midnight. What kind of boat are you on?"

"A 50-foot power cat," I responded. "I'll call you when we get close."

THE SPEED OF LIGHT

My husband Darrell and I have many years of experience sailing smaller boats under our belts, and we'd traveled the waters of southwest Florida quite a few times on our 21-foot Parker. My standard frame of reference was seeing the Gulf of Mexico pass by at 5 knots, 7 tops. When we kicked up the starboard engine and added the port, I was suddenly seeing southwest Florida in a whole new light. A very fast one.

My newfound freedom was courtesy of the *Albino Wino*, a custom 50-foot power cat from Kiwi designer Alan Wright. The boat recently joined the fleet of sail and powerboats at Southwest Florida Yachts (SWFY) in Fort Myers.

SWFY charters powerboats and sailboats from two locations near Fort Myers. Vic and Barbara Hansen, year-round Florida residents and avid cruisers, have run the business for nearly 20 years. Their fleet of

privately-owned yachts is a mix of daysailers, cruisers and oceangoing trawlers, ranging in size from 29 feet to 50 feet, with our Albino Wino currently the flagship of the fleet.

SWFY's bases in North Fort Myers just off the Caloosahatchee River and Burnt Store Marina on Charlotte Harbor offer access to an expansive stretch of southwest Florida, with cruising opportunities reaching north to Tampa Bay and south through Pine Island Sound, Naples, Marco Island and the remote and mysterious Ten Thousand Islands. Crossing through the middle of the state via the Okeechobee Waterway is yet another unusual trip accessible from the Fort Myers starting location. As the Hansens

are fond of saying, you can cruise Southwest Florida year after year and never cross your own wake.

ROOM TO BREATHE

Our floating home for the holiday weekend would offer us the chance to see beautiful Gulf Coast Florida from a new perspective. Our crew—which included my two sons and my mother-in-law Allene (known as “Mimi” to her grandkids)—had poked around the islands for years, by land and by sea. We'd all done some sailing and traveling, but this was the first time we set out together to spend a weekend cruising.

The boat featured an ideal layout for our group: crew bunks forward in the port hull, a queen berth in the starboard hull and a spacious master berth forward on the main deck. Every berth had its own head and shower.

“This is 50 feet of heaven!” said Ben, age nine, upon first glance

around the sprawling decks and extensive interior. A frequent tent camper and no stranger to rough waters, he appreciated this new level of comfort.

Seven-year-old Jake quickly set up shop in his berth on the port side of the boat.

I grinned and made my way to the raised pilothouse, listening to the boys chirping happily in their bunks, amazed that kids could plan an entire weekend around dinghy rides, LEGO wars and the purchase of an ice cream float at their favorite café on Captiva.

I was hoping the trip would include something for everyone. My 70-year-old mother-in-law was looking forward to Sanibel, a favorite old haunt of hers that she had last visited years before with her parents, now passed away. The kids couldn't wait to get to Captiva's South Seas Island Resort, and dinner at their favorite restaurant, the Bubble Room. I was looking forward

Opposite, sunrise in Pelican Bay. Below, Theresa and Allene on the flybridge in Pine Island Sound





to meeting up with friends camping on the wild and rustic Cayo Costa. Darrell just wanted to putter around Pine Island Sound and marvel at the boat's navigation systems.

When our crew was ready to go, Marc Winkel, SWFY's operations manager, joined us onboard and thoroughly reviewed the boat's systems with us. With its twin engines and shallow draft, he insisted the boat was a piece of cake to drive. His confidence in us was reassuring, but glancing at the 80 switches on the circuit panel, I couldn't help thinking it was a very large cake.

SEASHELLS BY THE SEASHORE

We inched off the dock and up the creek, making our way to the river. Finding our channel markers—and our comfort zone behind the wheel—we gave the *Albino Wino* her sea legs and the five of us settled in for the ride. The boat ate up the distance to Sanibel and arrived well before sunset, ahead of the forecast cold front. Sanibel Marina's dock manager Tom McColgan greeted us and took our lines.

Best known for its miles of sandy beaches and world-class shelling, Sanibel seemed the perfect place for the first night of our escape. The island's east-to-west configuration, in contrast to other barrier islands' north-to-south orientation, makes it an ideal "hook" for the thousands of shells that drift in from the Gulf of Mexico. Coquinas, scallops, whelks and sand dollars are common finds, while the local newspapers report the occasional discovery of the celebrated junonia shells. Sanibel's Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum claims to be the only museum in the world dedicated entirely to the study of shells.

A three-mile-long causeway connects Sanibel's 12-mile stretch of shoreline to Florida's mainland, while a bridge on the north tip connects it to Captiva. The Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation and the J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Preserve hold more than 65 percent of Sanibel Island in conservation. Pelicans, herons, egrets, anhinga, terns, sandpipers and seagulls make up a large portion

of Sanibel's population. During a short hike before sunset, I spotted a roseate spoonbill and bald eagle circling near the marina.

Sanibel's lighthouse hugs the southern point of the island, near the Sanibel Marina. Owned and operated by Myton Ireland since 1985, the marina has 65 slips for boats up to 70 feet and offers sight-seeing charters, fishing guides and boat rentals. Cruisers frequently take advantage of the marina's ideal location; easy access to the Intercoastal Waterway and direct access to the Gulf make it a convenient and enjoyable stop for boats headed north, south, east or west. Blueberry muffins and the day's newspaper delivered to every boat, every morning, is the marina's signature touch. Despite having a boatload of food, we opted for dinner ashore at Gramma Dot's Seaside Saloon, one of Sanibel's few waterfront restaurants.

With three generations on board, I noticed the five of us were developing a cadence between shipmates, moving from partner to partner,

Opposite, South Seas Resort. This page, Cabbage Key's Dollar Bar

and activity to activity. Allene and I enjoyed a short hike with Ben the first afternoon; early the next morning I went for a run while Jake and Darrell grabbed their poles and fished from the docks. Later, Allene played Clue with the boys while Darrell and I reviewed the charts and channels into Captiva. When it came time to leave, we all paused in our preparations to watch the dolphins glide through the channel.

"See you again!" McColgan said, as he tossed us our dock lines. Leaving the island was easier than I thought it would be—simply because Sanibel is a place you know you will return to, time and time again.

CAPTIVATED BY CAPTIVA

A sunny, clear Thanksgiving Thursday saw us making quick time of the clear blue miles up Pine Island Sound and we arrived at the South Seas Island Resort and eased into our slip. The

marina was packed with kids, catamarans and the "over 50 crowd"—boats with more than 50 feet on the waterline, that is.

"We're expecting several more 50-footers today," Harbormaster Charles Martz told us.

"They say 50 is the new 40," I called after him, as he climbed on his bike and pedaled off to meet the next 60-footer hailing him from the channel.

The South Seas Island Resort, a 330-acre wildlife preserve that opened in 1946, spans two-and-

a-half miles of shell-laden beaches on the Gulf of Mexico. The resort contains condos, restaurants, shops, a small water park and a spectacular pool along the Sound, along with a limited number of hotel rooms and a marina. Yacht Harbor Marina features 2,400 feet of alongside berthing for boats up to 120 feet. The resort itself is regularly ranked as a top getaway for families, and the daily schedule listings are packed with activities for kids. Despite its size, the place manages to maintain a natural feel, with all buildings



built below the tree line and a retro-looking trolley available to whisk guests around the resort.

The boys immediately ran off to Scoops & Slices, the resort's pizza and ice cream parlor, with their resort "charge card," while I contemplated my seven-year-old's signing rights to goods and services throughout the marina. Our intergenerational dance continued later in the day when Allene joined the boys at the waterpark; after tidying the decks and a little window-shopping, I cut in and took the kids

for a second round of ice cream. Jake produced his resort charge card and proudly announced that he'd pick up the tab. Later in the afternoon, the five of us rode the trolley to the resort's main gate and then walked the remaining mile to Captiva's eclectic and original Bubble Room for an unforgettable Thanksgiving dinner.

CHEESEBURGER IN PARADISE

The next morning we set out for Cayo Costa, with a mid-day stop at Cabbage Key for rum drinks and Shirley Temples. Cabbage Key sits on top of a 38-foot Indianshell mound, affording a panoramic view of Pine Island Sound. Daytrippers flock to the 100-acre island to enjoy a drink on the front porch, which overlooks the Sound, or a cheeseburger on the back porch, which overlooks a cypress swamp. Overnight guests can stay in the

lodge or in one of six cottages spread around the island, but the majority of the visitors stop in to see the bar.

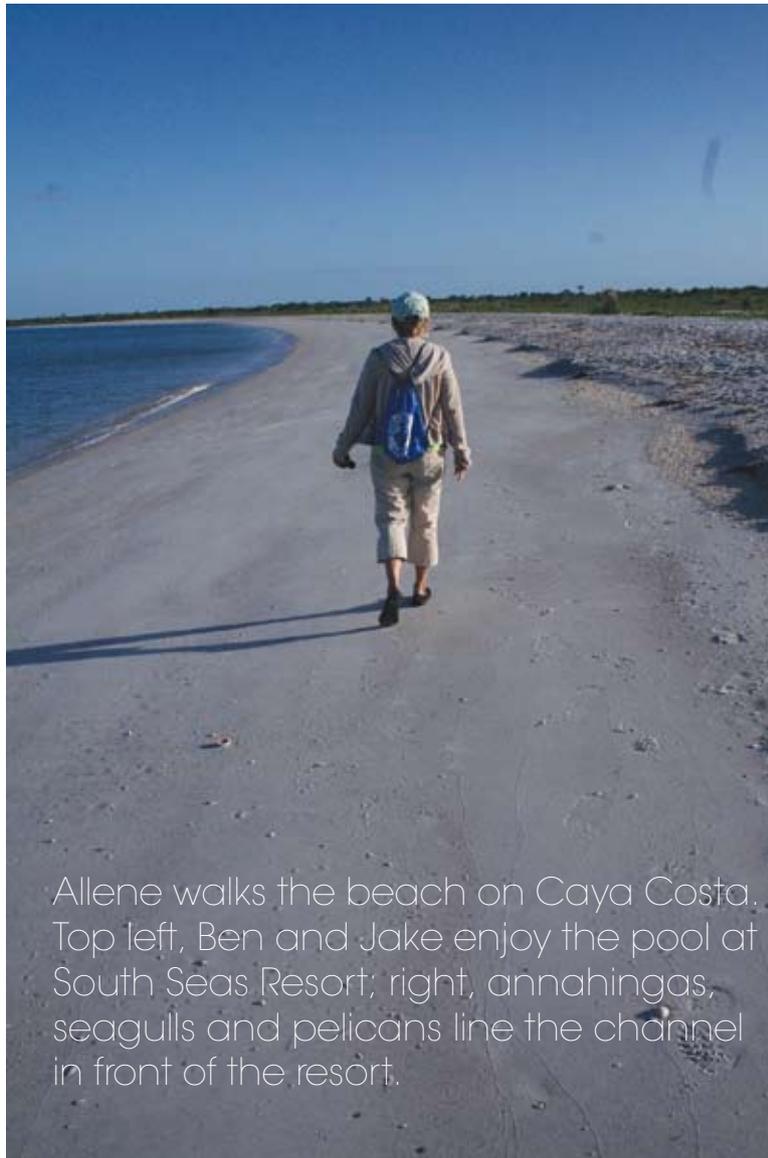
The 60-year-old landmark, with hardwood floors and cypress paneling, has tens of thousands of dollars taped to the walls. This custom reportedly dates back to a time when passing commercial fisherman who were flush with cash would stick a few extra dollars on the wall, in the hopes that should they show up in the future thirsty and short on funds, the investment would see



them through. We paid our bill in full, hammered up a few extra bills, and sailed on to Cayo Costa.

Cayo Costa is part of a chain of barrier islands that reaches across Pine Island Sound, west of Charlotte Harbor. The entire island is a state park and contains nine miles of white sandy beaches and 2,506 acres of pine forests, oak-palm hammocks and mangrove swamps. There are 12 primitive cabins and 30 tent sites for camping. A very small number of boat slips are available along the docks. Most boats choose to spend the night at anchor in the spacious, deep Pelican Bay.

We anchored off and took the dinghy to shore, catching the last trip of the day through the center of the island on Cayo Costa's only motor vehicle, the ranger's flatbed truck. We found our friends on Cayo Costa's crescent-shaped beach and enjoyed a rum drink on the sand. Darrell impulsively invited the whole gang to join us for sunset drinks and dinner on board and we headed back out to the Albino Wino to toss together dinner for 13. The party stretched well into the night, and Ben's "50



Allene walks the beach on Cayo Costa. Top left, Ben and Jake enjoy the pool at South Seas Resort; right, annahingas, seagulls and pelicans line the channel in front of the resort.

feet of heaven" easily absorbed the extended cast of dancers. Darrell dinghied everyone ashore late that night and we closed out our dance tickets for the day, trying not to think about heading home.

We lingered in the anchorage as long as we could the next morning—the boys opted for fishing and dinghy-driving lessons while Allene

and I went ashore for a beach walk and cowboy coffee in the campground. Eventually, though, we could hear the call of work and school schedules pulling us back in, so we lifted the hook just after lunch and headed back across the waters of the Sound. Dolphins danced in the waters near us, taunting us and scoffing at our choice. The five of us cursed them and laughed. Never once did we cross our own wake.■

Theresa Nicholson lived and sailed on her 1937, 31-foot Atkins ketch Tosca for 10 years. Trading up from an all-manual, double-ended wood classic to a sleek and easy 50-foot cat was quite the treat—even if it was just for the weekend! Tosca took Theresa and her husband Darrell through the Caribbean and South

America, across the South Pacific, and to the far corners of Southeast Asia. Now, Theresa and Darrell live in Sarasota, Florida with their two young boys and enjoy exploring the surrounding waters.

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