

# Great Journey, Great Loop

Boaters traverse scenic waterways of eastern U.S.

BY BOBBYE KENYON

**The Great Loop** has been described as the ultimate boating excursion. This mega-mile adventure affords boaters majestic views from waterways that pair the past with the present. The journey varies from 5,000 to 7,500 miles depending on the course you plot and will take you to vibrant cities and quaint towns along a splendid aquatic trail that circumnavigates eastern North America.

✓ Evan and Pookie Davis at Ellis Island Museum in New York Harbor.







▲ Evan Davis getting some navigation help from Scruffy, the wire-hair fox terrier that made the journey with him aboard his 25-foot Ranger Tug.



### The Great Loop Adventure

**A**n individual Great Loop journey typically begins and ends at your homeport. Once you've "crossed your wake," you've completed your trip. The itinerary usually charts an early spring course around Florida that heads north to New York City. The route follows the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) along the southeastern seaboard of the U.S., with an array of options to discover, including pristine barrier islands that dot the Georgia and Carolina coasts, incredible river channels and estuaries. Traverse Chesapeake Bay, Delaware Bay and resume on the ICW from Cape May to Manasquan, N.J. From there, it's an open 30-mile run across the cobalt-hued Atlantic Ocean to New York Harbor.

While the New York to Chicago segment offers a menu of routes that wind along Canada's lock-filled canals and the spectacular vastness of the Great Lakes, timing this leg is a key ingredient in a well-planned excursion. Experienced mariners recommend not venturing on the Erie Canal any earlier than mid-June and avoiding Lake Michigan by September.

Loopers cruise north past spectacular New York Harbor, making their way along the Hudson River, past Tarrytown and arriving at the eastern entrance of the Erie Canal with a trio of directional choices as they head toward Chicago. Height restrictions and lock considerations play an important role in this decision-making process. A less popular, although direct, course is the Erie Canal to Lake Erie, then up through Lake Huron to the timeless beauty of Mackinac Island. Traveling along the east side of Lake Michigan offers the best passage to the Windy City.

From Chicago, this Great Loop takes a southerly course traveling

down the Illinois River to the Mississippi, winding up on the Ohio and Tennessee rivers and eventually the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. The journey continues down to Mobile, Ala. and merges with the ICW going east to Carrabelle, Fla. Via the ICW, you can take a Fort Myers voyage and cruise the Okeechobee Waterway across to Stuart (on Florida's east coast), or you can make the southernmost passage to the Florida Keys around the tip of the state and return north to Stuart.

If you don't have the luxury of time to enjoy the entire journey, you can experience just a segment or side trip to one of the many stunning river or lake destinations. Among the favorite river outings are the St. Johns River with its picturesque vistas of Florida's not-so-tropical locales, and the Cumberland River, which showcases historical sites paired with a spectacular Nashville skyline against the backdrop of the region's natural beauty. Favored lake passages include Lake Superior, Lake Michigan's Inland Waterway and Seneca Lake off the Erie Canal.

### The Looper Lifestyle

**M**any opt to cruise one area during the summer months, then store their boat and chart a new course the following season, while some Loopers are liveaboards who make the entire journey in one trip stretched out over months at a time. One thing all members of this cruising clique have in common is that they relish the spirit of the journey, which is as much about camaraderie as it is about reaching the intended destination.

America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association (AGLCA) was formed by Ron and Eva Stob (authors of the guide "Honey, Let's Get a Boat"), after cruising the Great Loop in 1999. They wanted to share their navigational and cruising knowledge so others

could experience an enjoyable and safe cruise. The AGLCA offers a wealth of information that pertains to a Great Loop excursion and provides necessary facts for first-time, as well as repeat Loopers. The organization (which boasts a membership of nearly 5,000) organizes two rendezvous each year to welcome newcomers, renew old friendships and exchange stories and well-learned lessons. The first event is held near Charleston, S.C. in the spring, while the second is held at Joe Wheeler State Park in Rogersville, Ala. during the fall (this year scheduled for Oct. 24-27).

Three years ago, the Stobs passed the AGLCA helm to Steve and Janice Kromer, avid boaters in their own right with a longtime involvement in the U.S. Power Squadron in Charleston. Although the Kromers are only partially "Looped," they have logged numerous miles traversing the East Coast route aboard their 50-foot Marine Trader *No Sense3* and possess ample knowledge about this intriguing "blue interstate" that continues to lure boaters every year. Janice Kromer recommends that Loopers consider a relaxed cruising format. "Have a general plan, but not an itinerary. Be flexible and open to all the experiences along the waterway."

### Preparing for the Journey

**T**he advice from experienced Loopers is to make a checklist prior to your trip, and make sure the boat is serviced from bow to stern and all onboard electronics are in working order. Of course, timing your trip is an essential element to plotting a memorable voyage. "Most Loopers start the East Coast in the spring, spend the summer months along the Canadian waterways and complete the Gulf Coast crossing after Nov. 1," Janice Kromer explained.

Above all else, do your research. "Start the research early, use the



➤ **AGLCA members** receive a gold burgee upon completion of the Loop. Evan and Pookie Davis ended their 5,800-mile journey at their home port of Joe Wheeler Marina. **Inset:** Entering Peterborough Lift Lock on Trent-Severn Waterway.

Internet and visit websites detailing the Great Loop experience,” said Lyn Morgan, who successfully completed the Great Loop aboard his 23-foot Premier pontoon boat. Keep proper charts, reference books and GPS within easy reach. “Read charts and above all, check the NOAA weather forecasts online before you leave port or anchorage every day,” said Evan Davis, who traveled the Loop with his wife, Pookie, aboard their 25-foot Ranger Tug. “In Canada, NOAA redirects you to Weather Environment Canada. Let the weather control your schedule, not you.”

More tips from those in the know: Remember the cell phone charger and maybe even an extra battery. Get an adequate number of life jackets, and toss in some extras, just in case. Don’t forget to pack plenty of essentials such as sunscreen, insect repellent and raingear.

## Safety First

**E**van and Pookie Davis completed an exciting Great Loop voyage aboard *Pookie II*, a 25-foot Ranger Tug outfitted with a 110 hp turbocharged Yanmar diesel engine. They departed Feb. 23, 2009 from their homeport — a covered slip at Joe Wheeler State Park Marina in Alabama. After a 5,800-mile voyage, the couple crossed their wake at the entrance to the Tenn-Tom Waterway on the Tennessee River on Sept. 29, 2009. The highlights of the trip, which took the couple across Florida via Lake Okeechobee, were many. “Our favorite part was the Trent-Severn Waterway in Canada, but it’s really hard to choose a favorite,” Evan Davis said. “Second choices would be the west coast of Michigan, which has numerous delightful small harbors of refuge, or Georgian Bay, which is gorgeous.”

While their excursion was relatively problem-free mechanically speak-

ing, Mother Nature paid an unexpected visit. “We had no problems other than a bilge pump repair in Cape May, but (we experienced) horrible waves in the North Channel of Lake Huron at Meldrum Bay that were higher than the roof of the boat, which is seven and a half feet above the waterline.” Davis stressed the importance of safety and adequate communication tools for first-time Loopers. “Take a Safety and Seamanship U.S. Coast Guard course before you leave home and get an air card — Verizon has better coverage — for your computer,” he recommended. “The most dangerous thing to have on the Loop is a schedule,” he said, referring to the free-spirited Looper nature.

The Davis’ amazing seven-month adventure was filled with incredible memories that will last a lifetime. “The jewels of the trip are the new friends you get to make and keep on the entire trip,” Davis said.



## feature Making the Great Loop



### GREEN TURTLE BAY, GRAND RIVERS, KY

Kitty Nicolai launched her 23-footer from Green Turtle Bay with the help of fellow Coast Guard Auxiliarist Jim Daniels.

### JAMIE WHITTEN LOCK AND DAM, MS

Jim Daniels inside Whitten Lock, the northernmost lock on the Tenn-Tom Waterway. Photo by Kitty Nicolai.



### WHITE BLUFF, DEMOPOLIS, AL

Nicolai and Daniels cruised through historic and appropriately-named White Bluff along the Tombigbee River.

### BLACK WARRIOR RIVER, AL

Black Warrior River is the primary tributary of the Tombigbee River in central Ala. Photo by Kitty Nicolai.



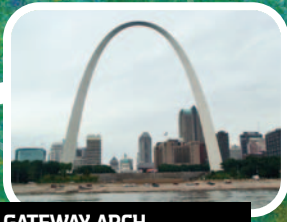




## SUMMER ROUTES

CHICAGO

## FALL ROUTES



GATEWAY ARCH  
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI  
EVAN AND POOKIE DAVIS

NASHVILLE



EIFFEL TOWER  
PARIS, TENNESSEE  
KITTY NICOLAI

MOBILE

CARRABELLE

## SPRING ROUTES

STUART

FORT MYERS



CAPE MAY, NEW JERSEY  
EVAN AND POOKIE DAVIS



ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND  
A favorite stop for AGLCA members

## feature The Great Loop



Lyn Morgan bought his Premier 235 S-Series PTX for use on Lake Powell (above). He completed his Great Loop journey in Tarpon Springs, FL (right).

➤ To learn more about Premier's PTX package, see page 34 for Alan Jones' test of the Premier 250 Intrigue.



### NOT YOUR TYPICAL PONTOONER

**T**his year, **Lyn Morgan** completed his inaugural 5,300-mile Great Loop cruise. Morgan embarked aboard his Premier 235 S-Series PTX pontoon boat in May at Kentucky Lake, Ky. The hull, powered by a 250 hp Yamaha, sports a full glass windshield along with additional features including the rough-water package, PTX triple-'toons for better handling performance and an adjustable chair mount.

"Not sure if anyone has done the Loop in a pontoon boat, but this one is capable," Morgan wrote in his blog during the first leg of his journey. "It's a heavy-duty tri-pontoon boat." Initially, Morgan intended to use the Premier on a lake. Then he got the idea for a possible excursion down the Mississippi. The idea finally evolved into a Great Loop voyage some eight months later. "I had originally ordered it for use on Lake Powell (Utah)," he explained. "I got interested in a trip going from Minnesota down the Mississippi and back. Then, (when I thought about) getting all the way down to Mobile, it made me realize the pos-

sibilities of the Great Loop trip. And that's when I decided that was what I wanted to do."

He completed the eight-week-and-a-day excursion July 17 with a list of incredible memories. "In the beginning, it's seeing America from the water," Morgan said. "And crossing the edge of the Gulf of Mexico with my friend Fred Martin (Martin boarded in Carrabelle, Fla. and disembarked in Fort Myers, Fla.) to Tarpon Springs (Fla.) was great. It was a 200-mile day ... the weather allowed us to cross. We were really going totally by GPS on that crossing."

Morgan admitted to doing plenty of research and encouraged first-timers to do the same. "Don't take it lightly," he said. "There are bits and pieces of advice that you need to tailor to your conditions depending upon the type of boat you are using." He described his Great Loop adventure as a "combination of a destination and a journey" limited to a three-month travel window. "It was a destination in what to accomplish with day-to-day goals, while it was a journey to see the countryside. I took a different approach with the type of boat I used ... it was more of an out-there experience."



Outerbridge and Tucker underway aboard *Dart*.

### Going About

**I**n May 2002, Bermuda resident **Gillian Outerbridge** shipped her boat stateside to Liberty Landing Marina, N.J. and launched the first of many travel plans.

During the next two years, she single-handedly (OK her Jack Russell terrier, Tucker, came too) cruised the Rideau Waterway and Trent-Severn Waterway from spring through fall aboard her Flicka 20-foot sailboat equipped with a Yamaha 9.9 four-stroke outboard. "I completed the Rideau Waterway that first summer and parked *Dart* back at Liberty Landing for the winter," Outerbridge explained. "On my return, I set off west on the Trent-Severn, reached Georgian Bay and Manitoulin Island. At this point, I was behind schedule to drive to the rendezvous at Manitoulin. I decided not to carry on around the Loop that year, so I trailered back to the west end of the Erie Canal with the focus on reaching Greece. My lifelong dream was to cruise to Greece in my own boat. This was a modified achievement of the dream: Greece, N.Y. not Greece, Greece."

She chronicled her nearly 1,000-mile summer voyages in the pages of her book, "Going About! A Waterway Adventure." "I loved every minute, especially the camaraderie amongst boaters," she said. Her advice to would-be Loopers is borrowed from the words of Lin and Larry Pardey: "Go small, go simple, go now." And Outerbridge took the advice. "That's what I did and don't regret a minute. Take the boat you have, the boat you know, and just go!"





➤ After passing through Jamie Whitten Lock, the Tenn-Tom Waterway eventually leads to the White Bluff area of Ala. Below: Kitty Nicolai spent 5 days in Paris Landing, Tenn. while her engine was repaired.



that proved to be the best course of action: make the trip via water. Nicolai and Daniels trailered the 23-footer to Green Turtle Bay, Ky. and launched from there in June 2008. Although her boat (CG Auxiliary 7045) is a vessel of the United States when under orders, this 1,200-mile voyage was not. She completed the cruise in just two weeks, despite a five-day delay for engine repair at Paris Landing, Tenn. When under way, she accomplished her goal of 100 miles per day.

While most cruisers have a designated favorite stop on their voyage, Nicolai admitted there isn't one on her list. "People make the place, and 99 percent of the folks we met along the way were superb," she said. She described her trip as "unconventional from that of most Loopers in that it was on board a smaller boat at a faster pace. And although the journey was simply too short and too fast, it will remain one of the highlights of our lives."

## Relocation

**A**fter years of considering a Great Loop voyage, **Kitty Nicolai** took a departure from the routine journey, making her dream trip come true via a unique twist from St. Louis to Florida's Gulf Coast. The U.S. Coast Guard auxiliarist was moving south and needed to get her boat to Hudson, Fla. along the scenic Gulf Coast region.

Her years of patrolling the waters from Lake Michigan to St. Louis with fellow Aux friend and boating aficionado Jim Daniels, prompted Nicolai to make a realistic decision

## ➤ Know Before You Go

### America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association (AGLCA)

500 Oakbrook Lane  
Summerville, SC 29485  
(877) 478-5667,  
[greatloop.org](http://greatloop.org)

### "Quimby's 2010 Cruising Guide"

The Waterways  
Journal, Inc.  
319 N. Fourth St.,  
Suite 650  
St. Louis, MO 63102  
(314) 241-4310,  
[quimbyscruisingguide.com](http://quimbyscruisingguide.com)

### Books by Ron and Eva Stob

"Honey, Let's Get a Boat:  
A Cruising Adventure of  
America's Great Loop"  
"Great Loop Side Trips:  
20 Cruising Adventures on  
Eastern North America's  
Waterways"