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UNDERWAY

EXPLORING *the BEST of the* CRUISING LIFESTYLE

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Perched at the entrance to Camden Harbor, Curtis Island Light earns its nickname “The Jewel of the Penobscot” with quiet confidence. From the cockpit, it’s a welcome landfall after a day threading along Maine’s storied coast. This is coastal cruising at its most elemental: cool salt air, the low moan of fog signals drifting across the bay, anchorages tucked into rocky nooks. Maine asks sailors to slow down and sharpen their seamanship skills while savoring the journey. For those new to the region, our At the Helm column on page 42 breaks down the practical realities of sailing in these waters from a first-timer’s perspective, so you can focus on exploring one of North America’s most rewarding cruising grounds.

Endeavors

After years on the Great Lakes, a trek up the Eastern Seaboard lends a fresh perspective on near-shore cruising off the Atlantic coast.

BY DAN KERPELMAN

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Wind-shaped dunes and wide beaches mark Bald Head Island at the mouth of North Carolina's Cape Fear River.

COURTESY DAN KERPELMAN



The LONG Way NORTH

Our first foray into salt life—sailing nearly 2,000 nautical miles from Lake Ontario to Maine—taught my wife, Sandy, and me just how much more there was to experience than lake sailing. We'd spent years cruising the Great Lakes, but our taste of long-distance coastal cruising led us to forgo our plans to return to Lake Ontario and instead adopt coastal Maine as our new sailing home. We sold our 2018 Beneteau Oceanis 41.1 *True North* and bought *Fregata*, a 2021 Amel 50. We shipped her from Sausalito, California, to Port Everglades, Florida, where we would begin our journey north to Maine—sailing on the outside.

The Amel brought an entirely new level of complexity to sailing. It had a cutter rig, center cockpit, running backstays, hydraulic autopilots, electric furlers, a shaft brake, water maker, diesel heater and genset. Many of these systems turned out to be in less-than-optimal condition, and this was our first experience with a pre-owned vessel.

It was also our first time sailing up the Eastern Seaboard. We thought we understood what we'd encounter, but the more we cruised, the more we realized there is to see and do in this part of the United States.

We paused in St. Augustine, Florida, for repairs and maintenance, gradually tackling *Fregata's* technical issues. This period of troubleshooting turned out to be a blessing in disguise: It gave us time to familiarize ourselves with the boat's systems, build confidence in our ability to solve problems, and prepare for the challenges of offshore cruising. Excitement began to replace trepidation as we prepared for our journey through 14 states and all

the natural beauty, history, wildlife and people we hoped to encounter.

Our passage north from Florida began in early May. The first navigational challenge was adapting to the shallow waters of the Southeast, a stark contrast to the deep waters of the Great Lakes and New England. With *Fregata's* 7-foot draft, we had to plan more carefully and pay close attention to tides. Anchorages and harbors in the Southeast are often miles inland, making it essential to time departures with ebb tides and arrivals with flood tides to avoid battling strong currents.

St. Augustine, Florida, for instance, has such powerful tidal currents that entering or exiting the city marina safely is only feasible during slack tide. Many inlets can be dangerously rough when the wind opposes the current, adding another layer of

once-domesticated animals freed into the wild.

Continuing north to Brunswick, Georgia, we began to appreciate Southern culture. The speech and mannerisms of the South are strikingly different from those of our native Northeast—and utterly charming. We were delighted to be addressed as Mr. Dan and Ms. Sandy, or, even better, “Honey” or “Sugar.” Despite our unfamiliarity, we were warmly welcomed everywhere we went.

From Brunswick, we rented a car and made a day trip to Savannah, a city steeped in history and brimming with character. Savannah’s beautiful parks include one designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, the famed landscape architect behind Central Park in New York City. Savannah is also home to stunning Victorian neighbor-

hoods and a cobblestone riverwalk. The Prohibition Museum offered surprising insights into that chapter of American history.

Our introduction to North Carolina came at Bald Head Island, a stunning, sandy island at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, with pristine beaches and welcoming locals. With a world-famous marlin fishing competition underway in Beaufort in late June, our planned staging port for rounding the Outer Banks was completely booked. This turned out to be a blessing, as it led us to Wrightsville Beach, a fun beach town that felt straight out of a 1950s beach-party movie, with some of the best surfing on the East Coast. We bravely enrolled in surf lessons, enjoying the fun (and frequent falls) into the pleasantly warm ocean water.

At Cape Lookout Bight, the southernmost point of the Outer Banks, a friendly cruising club from New Bern, North Carolina, invited us to a happy hour. We suspect they



complexity. We preferred to enter unfamiliar inlets and anchorages during daylight hours, so we took four months to explore the East Coast at a more relaxed pace, minimizing overnight passages.

Our first extended stop was Fernandina Beach, Florida, a charming town on Amelia Island near the Georgia border. We immersed ourselves in its colorful history of being controlled by France, Spain (twice), Britain and several other powers before becoming part of the United States in 1821. A bumpy 6-mile dinghy ride across the St. Marys River took us to Georgia, where we explored Cumberland Island, one of many natural barrier islands that shield the mainland from the ocean. We encountered kudzu—a parasitic vine that blankets trees and gives the landscape a jungle-like feel—and feral horses, descendants of

hoods and a cobblestone riverwalk. The Prohibition Museum offered surprising insights into that chapter of American history.

As the summer progressed, so did the heat, which meant it was time to put our genset and air conditioning to the test. Both worked, but with a few issues. The generator left a puddle of oil on the engine-room floor after each use and seemed to have a penchant for eating dipstick tips. With several dipstick tips floating somewhere in the oil pan, we couldn't tell how much oil remained, and the ongoing leak wasn't helping matters. Sadly, we decommissioned the generator for the season, planning to have it pulled, diagnosed and repaired during the fall haulout.

On the other hand, we had great luck with spotting dolphins. The most exciting

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We found Oxford, Maryland (left), to be one of the Chesapeake's most cruiser-friendly towns. Right: Departing Fort Pierce, Florida, at first light.

mistook us for one of their fleet, but they welcomed us nonetheless. This anchorage, surrounded by unspoiled beaches and the iconic Cape Lookout Lighthouse, reminded us of Cape Cod, a later stop.

One of our more challenging passages was the 220-mile stretch known as the “Graveyard of the Atlantic,” rounding the Outer Banks from Beaufort, North Carolina, to Norfolk, Virginia. We chose our weather window carefully. After departing in the afternoon, initially heading southeast to clear a line of shoals, we turned north for the overnight passage with a full moon, following winds and calm seas. With the gennaker flying the entire way, we made good time and arrived in Norfolk the following afternoon. Sailing far enough offshore, we caught a push from the Gulf Stream, which gave us the bluest water we’d

just a few minutes of operation. Since the transformer’s plastic housing trapped heat, I drilled holes in the housing and mounted a ventilating fan to keep it cool. This did the trick, and next season, I plan to wire the fan to turn on automatically whenever the

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Newport shares Annapolis’ sailing-crazy culture, and the harbor traffic requires constant vigilance.
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transformer is in use.

After transiting the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal and spending a night anchored on the Delaware River, we turned south again to round Cape May at the southern tip of New Jersey. There, we man-

like no other. We spent a few days in New York, enjoying the city and reacclimating to being up North. The gruffer style of New Yorkers is stark, but superficial—we found kindness here, too.

The next leg of our journey took us up the East River into Long Island Sound, including crossing the notorious confluence of the Harlem and East rivers known as Hell Gate. Thanks to strict adherence to timing recommendations, our transit was uneventful, and we thoroughly enjoyed motoring up the East River, flanked by New York City’s skyscrapers on either side.

We zigzagged along Long Island Sound, stopping in Port Washington, Port Jefferson and Oyster Bay, New York, as well as Mystic, Connecticut, before heading up Narragansett Bay to Newport, Rhode Island. Newport shares Annapolis’ sail-



ever seen, along with occasional dolphin sightings and schools of flying fish.

Many friends opted to meet us in the Chesapeake Bay, where we spent several weeks. Unfortunately, our timing coincided with a heat dome in July. We still couldn’t run the air conditioning without the genset at anchor, and we discovered that the Chesapeake’s jellyfish population makes swimming less appealing. Nevertheless, we enjoyed exploring Solomon Island, Oxford, St. Michaels and, of course, Annapolis.

To beat the heat, we reserved docks on the hottest nights to run the air conditioning on shore power. However, *Fregata* is wired for 230 volts and 50 Hz, typical of European boats, while North American shore power is 110 volts and 60 Hz. We used a step-up transformer to convert the power, but the heat proved too much for it after

aged to hook an undersea cable with our anchor. This happened in a narrow, busy harbor with strong currents and heavy boat traffic. I quickly deployed the dinghy, maneuvered to the bow, and tied a line between the cable and a deck cleat, allowing us to lower the anchor and free ourselves from the obstruction. Between the heat, jellyfish, undersea cables and smokestacks lining the shores of the Delaware River, we were more than ready to push on toward New York.

Words can hardly describe the emotion of sailing under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, past Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, and into New York Harbor. Sailing in the footsteps of our European ancestors who sought a better life in America was a profound experience, as was taking in the Manhattan skyline from the water—a view

ing-crazy culture, and the harbor traffic is second to none, requiring constant vigilance. Boats were anchored off Fort Adams, where an outdoor concert was underway. Tenders shuttled people to and from moored boats, several ferry lines crisscrossed the harbor, and an endless parade of private vessels came and went.

We made a stop at Block Island, Rhode Island, where navigating the channel into Great Salt Pond felt like rush-hour traffic into Manhattan, and the anchorage resembled a Black Friday parking lot. Despite the chaos, it was worth it. The island is beautiful and easy to explore by rented motor scooter or e-bike. Mohegan Bluffs to the south and Sandy Point to the north—home to curious seals—were particular highlights.

Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket were detours we couldn’t resist. Both islands

The author (left) with sailing buddy Todd VanderVen underway. Right: Nantucket’s quaint waterfront belies the tight quarters of its busy boat basin.

