

Who Lives Aboard a Boat and Why Do They Do It?

Why would anyone want to live on a boat? There is no simple answer to this question because people live on every conceivable size and type of boat for many different reasons. I will boil down some of the reasons into a few categories beginning with dumbest, those who do it on the cheap, before moving on to cruisers and voyagers.

Some live on boats because it can, under the right circumstances, be less expensive than living in a house on land. Living cheaply requires purchasing an inexpensive, otherwise known as small, boat and living a spartan life. Small boats have cramped living space, no personal space, and small galleys and heads. A head is the nautical term for a bathroom in which one unavoidably bumps the head while trying to get up off the toilet.

Generally, sailboats are less expensive than power boats which accounts for the preponderance of people living on sailboats. Living cheaply also requires performing minimal amounts of maintenance. Many who choose this lifestyle remain at a marina or mooring and never go anywhere which is good because their boats would probably sink. Gather enough of them together and basically you have a floating trailer park. Some marinas do not permit liveaboards because liveaboards usually accumulate unsightly deck junk. People living on small boats with small or no holding tanks use marina bathrooms and laundry facilities, and they generate trash. These attributes increase a marina's operating costs. Liveaboards counter this argument by noting the additional security liveaboards offer by keeping a twenty-four-hour eye on things. As if we want a dodgy person watching our expensive boat.

Not all cost conscious liveaboards are dodgy cheapskates that remain tethered to land. The more adventurous voyage to faraway places in small sailboats. These folks I hold in my highest regard for their temerity. Lin and Larry Pardey famously sailed around the world twice in two boats less than 30 feet long inspiring others to do the same. Neither of their boats had an engine. Living on a small boat as a minimalist takes a special type of person but it can be fun if you overlook being uncomfortable.

At the other extreme are those wealthy enough to hire a paid captain and crew to take care of the operations and maintenance of their boat. But I would not qualify either the owner or the crew as liveaboards. There is nothing wrong with room service but once and a while you just want to get into the kitchen and make a sandwich. Asking a hired crew to operate your boat is like sitting at home watching the National Geographic Channel all the time. I think it takes all the fun out of it.

Living on a boat that is large enough to provide comfort and ample space is not actually cheaper than a land-based home. The initial cost of a large boat can be competitive to a house, but the upkeep, maintenance, and operating costs are far greater than a home on land. Many people sell their homes and all their possessions to afford the cost of a large boat. Heck, many people sell everything to buy a boat that is not actually that large. This often leads to financial

ruin because the maintenance and upkeep will quickly drain any bank account. Plunking down a life savings on something that floats is very risky if you ask me.

Many liveaboards follow the seasons like birds moving south in the winter and north in the summer. This group is heavily populated by Canadians and Americans from the northern states. Often these "cruisers" move in groups that is known as "buddy boating." They drop anchor and remain in one spot, such as George Town in the Bahamas, for an entire season. This group also tends to enjoy dinghy rafting, pet parades, potluck dinners, and dressing up like pirates to drink and socialize with fellow boaters.

There are those who live aboard for a purpose such as doing the America's Great Loop, the Northwest Passage, or perhaps even sailing around the world. The majority in this group are retired but a surprising number are young people with children. After completing the objective many of these folks sell their boat and never look at the ocean again.

The uber-adventurous set out to break records or do unusual things such as sail solo non-stop the wrong way around the world against the wind. These perhaps foolhardy, but always intrepid sailors frequently employ specialty boats from beer kegs to super-fast multi-hulls. There are also solo sailors who are challenged to do unusual things or be the first to accomplish something unusual. Simply sailing around the world alone, a feat accomplished by Joshua Slocum in 1898, is not considered unusual although Robin Lee Graham who started out on the twenty-four-foot *Dove* at the age of sixteen in 1965 completed a circumnavigation that set the stage for future age related challenges.

In 2019 Randall Reeves completed what I think was an epic first-ever solo circumnavigation of both the American and Antarctic continents passing through all of the world's oceans on his 45-foot sailboat *Moli*. Randall is a wonderful writer, and his blog is worth spending some time reading. Midway through the Northwest Passage he described the confined waterways and headwinds, the unbearably flat land, noise and the boredom that comes with days and days of motoring with an engine upon which he tired of depending upon, the constant feeling of exposure and vulnerability, the risks and the consequences. I love how he summed up his experience by writing, "Many days on *Mo* are quite dull, a few are downright terrifying, most are made up of chores and the unexciting routine of shipboard life. When all those days are strung together and viewed as a complete voyage—a voyage that one envisioned, prepared for and pursued, largely on ones own—then they become a thing of deep satisfaction. But the fun had along the way is hardly worth noting."¹ Randall comes across a regular guy, but he is also exceptionally brave.

The last of my categories, that I have deceptively placed out of order because it applies to my wife and I, are those who just like being on a boat and having the freedom to experience new places. This group is growing in numbers every year. The internet is filled with their blogs. To quote one of them, "The boat is a tool that lets us visit other cultures, experiencing firsthand

¹ <http://figure8voyage.com/>

how others live, work, and play."² This category is heavily populated by retired couples who live on medium sized boats like ours that are large enough to be comfortable but small enough to be handled without extra crew. They voyage across oceans to see Europe, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Asia and even occasionally the more distant waters of the Indian Ocean and the Arctic. A few circumnavigate South America to achieve the goal of passing Cape Horn or dropping anchor in Antarctica. Some remain aboard for several years until they either become tired of the life, too old or, more frequently, run out of money. Some actually stop to work in faraway places for a while to replenish the "cruising kitty." Some write books and articles for magazines. Many have jobs that allow them to continue working by using the internet.

Among this group are those who support their lifestyle by more entrepreneurial means such as crowd funding, hosting subscription based educational web sites, or producing interesting YouTube videos. There are a few who sell their knowledge and experience to "crew" who pay for the privilege of making a one-time long-distance voyage.³

I have described only a few of the interesting people that we have met along the way. We have been extremely fortunate to meet many that have similar interests and ambitions to our own. From them we have learned a lot and are grateful to call them friends.

² <https://buffalonicelblog.com>

³ <https://www.59-north.com/#start> is an example of a couple who have found a way to monetize their cruising desires.