

What I Did Over My Summer Vacation

Most of us have traveled by car, train, or plane to/from a desired vacation spot, but when Rheta's cousin, Jimmy invited me on a boat trip that would take in many ports of call (thus making the journey itself the destination), I said, "yes, count me in". Jimmy's wife, Anne, was a bit concerned about having a competent crew accompany Jim, as his last crew, recruited via Craigs List, had no sailing experience and complained about having to do work on board. One of those crew members even emailed home, "This trip with Captain Storm, can best be described as days of boredom punctuated by hours of sheer terror"! That planned trans Pacific trip was canceled before I could make my leg of the journey to Tahiti.

The adventure this year would start out from Jacksonville, FL, proceed north to NY via the Inter coastal Waterway, pick me up at one of the locks on the Erie Canal, and continue through the Great Lakes, down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico and home. Jimmy, his brother Tom, and a long-time friend, Dwight, got the voyage underway on May 23, 2016. The boat was a 30' trawler made by Camano in Seattle. It sleeps three and has sufficient creature comforts, including kitchen, bath, generator and navigation system. I gleaned this much while still in Shirley via an occasional email from Tom. Anne stressed that I pack light. I still had no idea what the boat looked like, though, or whether I could endure months "at sea".

In the first three weeks of travel, Jim, Tom and Dwight encountered Tropical Storms Bonnie and Colin. I re-checked by bag to see that my foul weather gear was packed! Also, considering the extra days that we might spend at anchor due to bad weather, I downloaded a number of books to my phone in the event we "idled" a while.

Tom's daughter was expecting a baby "imminently" by the time the boat reached Maryland. The crew took an extended pit stop in Annapolis until Alba was born on June 25th. Unfortunately, it was here Jimmy decided on a change in plans. Saying he was no longer "so fit as I once was", he would go no farther north, but, rather, return to Jacksonville. Though, initially, the timeline change was a dilemma, my story finally begins! Although I hadn't anticipated leaving home until the end of July and after Rheta's thyroid surgery, I boarded the boat near Baltimore, replacing crew member Dwight. I had promised Jim's wife that I would help out. Thanks to a great support team at home, Rheta handed me my bags, snacks and sent me off on Amtrak.

At a bon voyage dinner in Maryland, I learned about some happenings during the first portion of the trip – the storms, a sea rescue of a jet skier and a running aground at Lockwood's Folly where the ocean cuts a channel to the inter coastal waterway. There, the boat was hauled out of the water, prop and rudder examined and cooling system cleaned. I'm glad I missed that excitement. We had our own.

Leaving Annapolis I was instructed to keep to the right of the buoy as soon as we left dock. We were only going 1 or 2 knots by the navigation display, or was that the water depth? Too late! We could not back up but just kept the momentum going over the shoal onward to the deeper channel. (Coincidentally, the boat's name is Onward). The Chesapeake Bay opened out to a sea of rolling waves, whitecaps and salt spray. I turned a matching shade of grey/green, but held on. I was handed the helm for the majority of the day since I need to have a horizon reference to preclude seasickness. By the end of the day, we moored in a protected anchorage, where I was handed a bottle of "bug juice" (filtered water with a sugary colorant). I was not hungry. The mere sight of pork chops and green beans in a thick butter sauce was too much for my stomach. I got out of doing dishes the first two nights because I was too sick to eat.

Navigating smaller river ways cut down on the pitching and heaving. But, of course, intense concentration was needed in the shallower water to avoid the hundreds of crab pots, jet skiers, fishermen and sailboats. I heard about many sightings of dolphins and manatees, but, to this point, had not seen any myself. We passed Navy ships in Norfolk, through a gauntlet of Harbor Police, Coast Guard patrols and Homeland Security vessels. I was confident Jimmy's prior Coast Guard experience would keep us out of trouble.

I was amazed to see how the canal lock system allowed us to connect to the next navigable waterway. One such trek took us through the "Great Dismal Swamp". We had to call ahead to the bridge operators to stop highway traffic and open the bridge so we could pass through.

Heading south, the temperatures kept going up. Jimmy liked getting a daily swim in the river (not nearly so clean as our pool!), but after seeing a bear in the water one day and an alligator the next, he opted for the pool at one of our extended city stops.

Elizabeth City welcomed us with a 4th of July fireworks display. The dockside mooring offered a chance to stretch our legs, dine ashore, enjoy the city celebrations, ice cream and fresh baked goods. The Museum of the Albemarle was an air-conditioned delight and offered numerous interesting historical displays.

Each morning, Jimmy would get his pot of tea set out on deck while we waited for our coffee to brew. His tea steeped before the coffee perked,. No sooner would our coffee be ready then Jim would say, "Shall we get going?"

One day we heard "Pan, Pan" coming over Radio Channel 16. A 25' boat was taking on water and, later, capsized. Three people clinging to the boat were rescued, but their boat sank. We were not close enough to be of any assistance.

Trouble followed us. I started out one day at the helm, but handed it off to go make pancakes. Lockwood's Folly has a second chance at the boat as we hit a sandbar not marked on the charts. This time alarms went off. The bilge pump began spewing out sandy water. We tied up to assess damages and concluded that the repair work done on the way up was inadequate. A critical pressure plate/spacer had not been installed on the water filter and the mechanic over tightened a plastic cap causing a stress crack to develop. Of course, running aground didn't help matters as the pump clogged with sand and the higher pressures broke the cap away. After cleaning out the filter and crazy gluing the cap, we continued on. New replacement parts were Fed-Exed to our next port of call.

Meanwhile, I'm still trying to figure out which part of this trip is supposed to be the enjoyable, relaxing part. Our stopover at Hilton Head Island Marina came close. Their restaurant was great, though I can't remember much past the double rum punches and the pool. I was always grounded with my daily calls back home to Rheta. She recovered from her operation just fine. A face-time call to her was memorable for me, but not for Rheta still groggy from post-op painkillers.

Nearing Myrtle Beach, we saw many homes in the \$\$\$ - \$\$\$\$ range. A good many boaters gave friendly waves as we passed.. One day a not-so-friendly pirate ship crewed by youngsters wearing tri-cornered hats and eye patches aimed water cannons at us. Had we been more alert, we would have retaliated and fought back using the water pistols we used for clearing the bilge. Other highlights here included being buzzed by a WW II fighter and watching F-18's doing touch and go's at

a nearby Marine Corps base. When we were docked between two paper mills I finally got some close-up pictures of those elusive dolphins. One seemed to be laughing at me.

Drawing close to Georgia, one needn't have been a weatherman to predict the weather. Hot all day with a thunderstorm in the afternoon; then hot all night. One scorching day, in which we were besieged by a cloud of biting flies, ended in a severe thunderstorm. We raced for our planned anchorage and braced for the storm. Winds whipped, seas boiled with foam and lightning struck so close we all jumped- (or did we cower?) Our generator gave up. We had no A/C. A dead calm brought out the mosquitoes and no-see-ums. No amount of repellent was enough. The 100 degree heat in the cabin left us with sweat soaked sheets and pillowcases. In the morning, Jim carried a rope to re-secure a loose wire to the bimini where the solar panel is attached. The wind had torn the wires right off! At our next land mooring, we soldered wires and re-secured loose ends. Evening festivities were capped off with a postponed fireworks display.

I was getting drenched in sweat with all this activity. Jim and Tom kept pointing me toward the shower, saying it was easy to use. Think of a 3' X 3' closet with a toilet taking up most of the standing room. If you dropped the soap, you would have to open the door to be able to bend down and pick it up. I had sponge baths and the much sought after marina overnights where I was given a code to open the shower, bathroom or laundry. I kept wondering what was the smell?

With Jacksonville in sight, my thoughts went to HOME, shall I take a fast train? Better yet, a plane. I booked a Southwest flight. I packed my bag and was ready to go. While unloading the boat and perishables (some light beer and near empty box of wine) I discovered the 3 dozen eggs beneath my mattress that Jimmy stored aboard using a doomsday prepper's technique. If fresh eggs are sealed with lard they may keep refrigerated at room temperature. These eggs he assured me were still good despite being bought from the supermarket, sealed with margarine. As Jimmy picked up the eggs to bring home several exploded in his hand. The smell mystery was solved.

As Anne prepared a turkey feast welcoming dinner for the intrepid sailors, I spent frustrating hours attempting to check-in for my flight. Southwest's computer system crashed nationwide.

Now that my "sea legs" have worn off I am planning my next trip. Maybe a cross country sightseeing train ride or a walk to our pool. Does anyone want to accompany me? Craigs list applicants need not apply! Jimmy is hoping to find a buyer for the trawler. All offers considered.