

Smoots conquer the Great American Loop

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

When most folks retire, they look forward to relaxing, maybe even taking a leisurely trip.

But Aubrey and Terri Smoot of Ditchley aren't most folks. They weren't content to travel to a tropical island and sip fruity drinks on the beach.

"We thought how else in this era and phase of life can you find an adventure," said Aubrey. A lifelong boater with an inherent adventurous spirit—passed down from his grandfather who drove from Delaware to Alaska in the 1960s before there was GPS navigation or cellphones—Aubrey wanted more from his first year of retirement.

The couple, along with their four-year-old vizsla, Yudee, went on a year-long adventure and joined an exclusive club of boaters completing the Great American Loop. Their's actually was a little longer than most looper voyages courtesy of a custom-built Aspen named Shorebilly Too!, which allowed them to go where others couldn't. They traveled 8,239 miles through three countries in 363 days.

"We were able to see so many places in the U.S. and Canada that we would have never been able to see otherwise and seeing it by water was just amazing," said Terri.

In April, the two received their BaccaLOOPerate degree from America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association (AGLCA). The degree, and the gold flag they now fly from their boat, signi-

fies the completion of the adventure. Most boaters completing, or "Crossing the Wake" as it's called, do a 6,000-mile journey circumnavigating the eastern part of the U.S. and Canada, cruising up the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway through the New York State Canals, into the Great Lakes and down the inland river system across the Gulf of Mexico and around the southern tip of Florida.

"Our boat, because of its lower height and its ability to handle rougher seas and go at faster speeds, allowed us to go to Quebec," said Terri, who was 63 when they made the trip. Aubrey also was 63.

Aubrey had proposed to Terri on a sailboat so it was

only fitting that they spend an adventurous first year of retirement at sea. A transplant to the Northern Neck by way of North Carolina, Aubrey is from the Eastern Shore of Virginia, hence the nod to his roots with the name of his boat, Shorebilly Too!

The Smoot route, which started on May 1, 2023, from their dock on Dividing Creek aboard their custom-built 37-foot Aspen with a catamaran hull, contributed to their mobility.

"We could (travel) on days other people would not," said Terri. "And in weather other people would not," added Aubrey.

Terri explained that Loopers are constantly chasing warmer weather, moving out of the northern areas before the cold temperatures moved in. Traveling up the Hudson River to Quebec City, "we passed the Statue of Liberty," said Aubrey. "How cool is it to

Everybody has a Story



Terri and Aubrey Smoot, along with their dog Yudee, recently completed a one-year Great American Loop boat trip and proudly display the gold flag which signifies they "crossed the wake" or completed the loop.

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go past the Statue of Liberty on your own boat.”

The Loop usually has some 250-ish boats traveling together yet separate. There were times the Smoots spent making friends with fellow boaters but there were also times they were totally isolated, with no boats or signs of civilization in sight.

“We were in areas that man has never touched,” said Aubrey. “Places that looked just as it did 2000 years ago.” One such place was the picturesque Georgian Bay, a large bay of Lake Huron in Canada which includes some 30,000 islands. The islands represent the world’s largest freshwater archipelago and are thought to be eroded roots of an ancient mountain range.

“With massive rocks all around the channel, navigating was a challenge,” said Terri. “I would stand up on the bow and spot for rocks.”

They met with other obstacles, most involving Yudee, who’d have to be taken to shore by dinghy to “do his business.” Aubrey always had that duty. In Tennessee’s alligator country, that was a treacherous trek with Terri staying aboard the Shorebilly but spotting for gators as Aubrey and Yudee went to shore in the tiny dinghy.

Aubrey usually scoped out

Yudee spots during the day so he’d know where to go during Yudee’s nighttime visits. But once on Kentucky Lake, he and Yudee were both surprised.

“That night I heard many, at least multiple, wolves howling. But that’s not the funny part. When I went to take him ashore, he was on edge, presumably from smelling the wolves earlier. We were halfway to shore when a dang Asian Carp jumped right in front of us and almost landed in the dinghy. Scared the crap out of both of us. When I finally got him to shore, it took the longest time for him to settle down enough to get his business done so we could go back to the boat,” said Aubrey.

Although the main route is the same, all of the loopers design their own specific routes with the aid of apps and with lots of help from the AGLCA.

When the Smoots passed along the Florida Keys, they opted for a quick 70-mile run to the Bahamas, where they met with some rough seas.

“We were always mindful of the wind and the weather,” said Terri. “And on that day, the weather called for calm seas.”

The weather forecast lied. “All indications were it was going to be a good day, but

they were off by about three hours,” said Aubrey.

They had encountered some 4-5 foot seas in Lake Michigan but met with 7-10 foot seas near the Bahamas with no cellphone signal.

“It was a little tricky at times,” said Terri.

Along with making provision stops every four days, the Smoots also visited friends and family in other states and made ‘tourist’ stops.

Most of the waterway stops were in rural towns trying to revitalize their economies, said Aubrey. So the people there were so welcoming, bringing loopers flowers, breakfast and gifts.

“As great as the route—and it was spectacular—the people we met were even better,” said Terri.

Their journey was a once-in-a-lifetime, bucket-list experience but the Smoots were happy to return to Northumberland County where their neighbors greeted them with a warm homecoming.

“Having seen waterways that are mind boggling and some of the most amazing in the world, the Northern Neck is still one of the most beautiful places to me,” said Aubrey.

Editor’s note: To read more about the Smoots’ Great American Loop, visit Aubrey’s blog at <https://keeping-you-in-the-loop.blogspot.com/?m=1>