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Story By Bill Jacobs

Once again, proving that there is nothing new under the sun, easily one of the most popular and fastest growing tools of our technological age is the unlikely named activity, the blog. This ungainly contraction of the words "web" and "log" results in a rather, well, distasteful sounding four-letter word, one we must reckon with.

But is it so new? Not really. The "web" portion certainly refers to the world we live in, however the "log" is right out of maritime history. A typical page from a four-masted ship carefully details locations, conditions, and important events of an ocean voyage. Ship's logs have captured the essence of maritime travel since man began to utilize the earliest navigational concepts and tools. So it should not be surprising that blogs have become commonplace on recreational voyages taken in this modern world. In fact, given the nautical derivation, maybe these maritime journals should be called "slogs," a contraction of the term "ship" and "log."

It is only fitting to refer to the most ubiquitous source of new web-based knowledge, the famous Wikipedia site, to begin to understand the blog. There are those who view the entries with suspicion, as professional editing is not one of its hallmarks, but then, neither is it for the blog. According to Wikipedia, the blog "is a type of website, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other materials such as graphics or video."

Although they are primarily textual, blogs differ from email messages because of the layout, the reverse chronological sequence, embedding of photographs, videos, or links, and the inclusion of running commentary by the audience. The layout can utilize the owner's choice of a variety of templates offered by popular blog sites such as Google's Blogger, or they can be custom designed, sometimes with very artistic results, making a dramatic impact.

The modern blog developed from online diaries. It is generally accepted that blogging began in 1994 with Justin Hall, a student at the time at Swarthmore College. *The New York Times* in 2004 referred to him as the founding father of personal blogging. Blogging grew rapidly in the late 1990s. The launch of Open Diary in 1998 marked the first blog community where readers could add their comments. In 2002, an early milestone in the use of blogs for political purpose came when U.S. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott made remarks on a blog site that were considered to be racially biased. The major media organizations did not report on the controversial comments until blogs broke the story. By 2004 the blog was widely recognized as a mainstream communication tool that continues to affect the traditional journalism industry.

Boats & Blogs

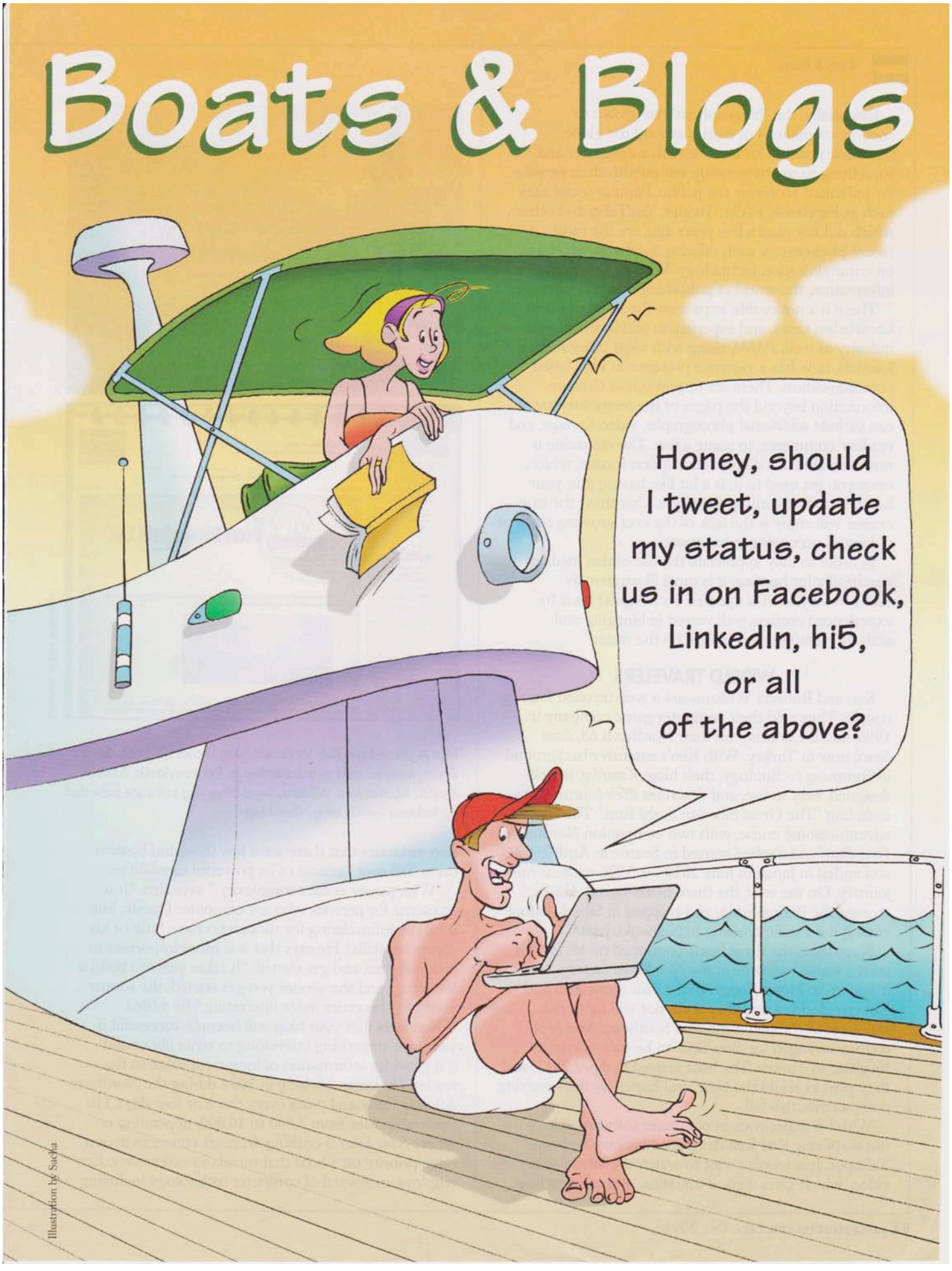


Illustration by Sacha

Essentially, the "blogosphere" has grown to encompass millions of entries around the globe, making it possible for anyone with a computer and something to say to instantly self-publish their agenda for unlimited access by the public. Popular social sites such as Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, YouTube, and others, which did not exist a few years ago, are the most recent phenomena, each offering a different emphasis on communication technology. With this vast array of information, the world of publishing is in a sea change.

There is a noticeable impact on the transference of knowledge, news, and experiences within the marine industry as well. *PMM*, along with most other marine journals, now has a vigorous presence in web-based communication. There are opportunities to share information beyond the pages of the magazine that can include additional photographs, video footage, and readers' comments, to name a few. The magazine is now available in a digital subscription format, which, once you get used to it, is a lot like having it in your hand, including turning the pages. One thing the true cruiser will enjoy is the lack of the ever-growing stack of old issues occupying cabin space.

In order to fully appreciate the use of this medium specifically for boating, it is most illustrative to visit a variety of sites updated on a regular basis by experienced cruisers well versed in blogging and actively pursuing their course on the water.

WORLD TRAVELERS

Ken and Roberta Williams are a well-traveled cruising couple. They sold their computer game company in 1996, and are cruising on their Nordhavn 68, *Sans Souci*, now in Turkey. With Ken's extensive background in computer technology, their blog, *Kensblog*, is well designed, easy to use, and describes their journeys including "The Great Siberian Sushi Run." This adventuresome cruise, with two companion Nordhavns, *Grey Pearl* and *Seabird*, started in Seattle in April 2009 and ended in Japan in June 2010—a 5,276 nautical mile journey. On the way, the three boats visited Alaska, crossed the Bering Strait, and stopped in Siberia before ending the Pacific crossing in Nagasaki, Japan.

Since then, the three boats continued on to Taiwan with a warm welcome at the Nordhavn factory. Next, it was on to Hong Kong. After a visit there, Ken and Roberta decided that they were not willing to risk problems in the pirate-infested Southeast Asia area, so they arranged for *Sans Souci* to be transported by freighter to Turkey. The boat arrived in April 2011, and they plan to rejoin the boat, and hopefully their cruising companions, this fall.

With his experience in computer software, it is not surprising that Ken developed his own website, Talkspot. It is worth a visit to watch the introductory video, which gives a good initiation to creating a blog.

Courtesy of Ken Williams

Top: A photo from Ken Williams' blog shows his boat, *Sans Souci*, moored next to a battleship in Petropavlovsk, Siberia, Russia. Above: Ken Williams used blogging software provided by Talkspot for his blog, *Kensblog*.

Ken estimates that there are a few thousand boaters using Talkspot because of its powerful capabilities.

"With power comes complexity," says Ken. "It is awesome for persons who are computer literate, but it can be intimidating for those who have little or no computer skills." He says that it is more important to pick a system and get started. "It takes years to build a following, and the sooner you get started, the sooner your blog becomes more interesting," he added.

Ken feels that your blog will become successful if you have something interesting to write about and if it provides information of long-term value to the reader. He began his blog in 2004 during the Nordhavn Atlantic Rally and posts every three or four days. His readership runs from 3,000 to 10,000, depending on where *Sans Souci* is cruising. Internet connectivity is a huge priority on a boat that travels so extensively. Ken employs an arsenal of computer technology including

Iridium, SkyMate, wi-fi, 3G, BGAN, FleetBroadband, and mini VSAT.

Since the completion of the voyage, Ken has published a book, *The Great Siberian Sushi Run*, available in paperback or, of course, it can be downloaded through www.LuLu.com.

You can cruise with Ken and his two companion boats at:

www.kensblog.com, www.greypearl.talkspot.com, and www.seabirdlrc.com.

NEW BOAT, NEW BLOGGER

John and Jeannie Coyle purchased *Seabright*, their new Outer Reef 65 in 2008. They took their first cruise north from Florida to Chesapeake Bay and headed back south. In addition to learning about their new boat, John was new to blogging. He chose the Blogger site because of its simplicity. Like all newcomers to blogging, it is interesting to read his earliest efforts and note the increasing familiarity as the site develops. The Coyles work on the blog together and include many photographs in their postings, which are very popular with their readers. It has been invaluable to John and Jeannie in keeping in touch with friends and family.

John keeps the narrative short so that it does not become too big a chore. "It takes time after a day's run to get organized, write, and post pictures," says John. He is utilizing the SPOT Satellite GPS Messenger, providing instant position locations and vessel tracking on a Google map. He uses a Verizon AirCard connected to a DLink DIR-450 with a cellular booster, which has allowed him to post between 5 and 10 miles offshore.

The Coyles came back to the west coast of Florida in early January, and their journeys have taken them to the east coast of the state, transiting the Okeechobee Waterway to Stuart, and then to their home in Kilmarnock, Virginia. Next was another run south, ultimately terminating in March of 2011 in Key West to participate in an Outer Reef rendezvous. The summer of 2011 began with the boat back at home for a haulout and servicing. As of this writing, *Seabright* was docked in Annapolis, Maryland.

Now having been involved in the blog world for over two years, John has become an old hand at publishing on his blog site. He posts regularly (every couple of weeks on average) and has covered many different angles and experiences, ranging from technical details, interesting visits, and introductions to boating friends. John feels that regularity in posting and variety in subjects keep his material fresh and his audience interested: www.john-jeannie.blogspot.com.

Courtesy of John and Jeannie Coyle

Left: *Seabright* at the Coyles' home off beautiful Indian Creek in Kilmarnock, Virginia. From there it's an easy distance to Chesapeake Bay. Right: John and Jeannie Coyle enjoying Cuttyhunk, Massachusetts. *Seabright* is moored in the background.

INLAND CRUISERS HEAD FOR THE SEA

Brenda and Ken Bloomfield are experienced boaters and members of the U.S. Power Squadrons in Knoxville, Tennessee, located on the Tennessee River. After attending an America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association rendezvous in 2007, they decided to prepare themselves and their 50-foot Marine Trader trawler, *Tellico Lady*, for their own Great Loop cruise. Two and half years later, after extensive planning, they were on their way, departing on Oct. 2, 2009.

After a trip down the Tennessee River they headed for the Gulf of Mexico and the west coast of Florida by way of the Ten-Tom Waterway. By February 2010 they had reached Stuart on the east coast. By July they had reached the Great Lakes and returned home in September of 2010.

Their blog not only provides a running account and excellent photographs of the journey, but also an extensive section on the technical preparations and equipment additions that were made to the boat. These entries call out the specific equipment and the reason for the upgrade. Any cruiser planning such a voyage will benefit from reviewing this blog.

Harold DeHart

Bill Rogers

Top: Despite having cruised for almost 6,000 miles, Brenda and Ken Bloomfield say that the scenery and the cruising on the Tennessee River is still the best they can find. Above: The crews of *Tellico Lady* and companion cruiser *M/V Watauga* were able to update their blog sites in near-real time by trading photos of each other—a benefit of having onboard access to the Internet nearly full time.

Their "Logbook" section was updated almost daily. Notable is the consistency of the photographs that complement the written log. The blog will serve as a detailed journal of the trip of their dreams.

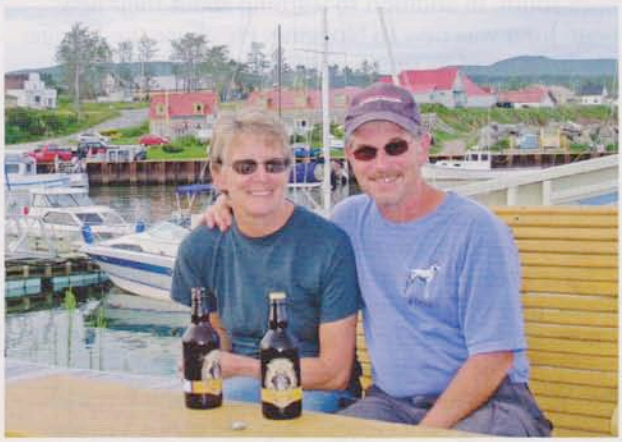
Rather than using a blog site, Ken has his own URL/domain, which is hosted by GoDaddy. Because he is quite facile with computer technology, Ken finds this a real advantage in his ability to set up and modify his website, but he admits that the use of a blog site is best for those not so familiar with computers and the Internet. He makes use of a wide array of connectivity devices including local marina wi-fi, cellular air cards, two cell phone service providers, and a digital antenna with a cellular amplifier. He utilizes the SPOT satellite system to update his location: www.tellicolady.com.

THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

Steve and Barb Sipe's journey really began in 1975 with the purchase of their first powerboat, a 17-foot Caravelle. Since then, a continuous evolution of their family, careers, and boating activities has launched them off on a lifelong dream aboard *Maerin*, a 1999 43-foot Solo Trawler. The boat is named for the mermaid who was allegedly the wife of the Norse god, Thor.

The Sipes purchased her in 2006 and spent the next two years shifting gears. They quit their jobs, sold their business, real estate, and house, and shed the accumulation of 24 years of stuff. Finally, Steve and Barb moved aboard in June 2008 and headed north from their mid-Atlantic home. They began their blog in July 2008 and have been actively posting every few days since. Steve has experience in website design, coding, graphics, and database design, so he chose WestHost to create his own domain. This experience allowed him the flexibility to customize, change the site when desired, integrate a complete photo gallery, and add graphic content of his choice to dress up the site.

He tracks the number of visitors and averages about 1,000 visits per month. Connectivity is achieved using



Photos by Steve Sipe

Top: *Maerin* approaches Sampson Cay, Exumas, as the Sipes join 17 other Selene trawlers for the wrap up of the 2011 Selene rendezvous. Above: Sampling the local fare in L'Anse-à-Beaufils in Quebec Province, one of the Sipes' favorite spots on their cruise. According to their blog, the locals were warm and friendly, the food was great, and the scenery was spectacular!

Carol Peterson

Jim and Marge Curley

Above: *Gaelforce* at Chatterbox Falls, Desolation Sound, B.C., one of the most beautiful, peaceful, and protected anchorages in the Pacific Northwest. The Curleys spent one night on the free public float in front of the falls, and one night on a free mooring ball at MacDonald Island, farther down the inlet. Left: Jim and Marge Curley of *Gaelforce*, right, with Ron and Carol Peterson of *Kodiak*, at Malibu Rapids in Princess Louisa Inlet, nearing the completion of a 5,000-mile, six-month cruise from Channel Islands Harbor in Southern California to Glacier Bay, Alaska, and back.

a CradlePoint MBR1000 router on board for multiple computers. An EnGenius 3220 access point connects to an external 10dBA high-gain antenna. If no wi-fi point is available, the CradlePoint will connect to a Palm Centro and Verizon 3G network. Steve advises new bloggers to match their expectations to their skill level: "Use a 'canned' application if you are not comfortable with developing your own blog from scratch," he says.

As of this writing, *Maerin* was docked in Stansbury, Maryland. The Sipes have spent the last several years cruising extensively on the East Coast of the United States, the west coast of Florida, and in the Bahamas. In addition, they have cruised as far north and west as Rochester, New York, and into Canada, rounding the Gaspe Peninsula, returning around the New England coast. Throughout this lengthy cruise, their blog site was updated every few days with text and photographs. It is one of the most detailed of the accounts I have reviewed: www.maerin.net.

THREE BOATS BOUND FOR ALASKA

Jim and Marge Curley, owners of *Gaelforce*, a Fleming 55, accomplished a voyage during 2009 from Channel Islands Harbor in southern California to Alaska, and back. They planned the trip as a convoy with two other boats: Ron and Carol Peterson aboard *Kodiak*, a Grand Banks 65, and Bill and Carolyn Chowanec aboard *Loose Wire*, a 55-foot Tollycraft. All three couples were experienced boaters aboard capable cruising boats and shared the adventure of a lifetime. Jim and Marge were not experienced with blogging before the cruise, but decided to give it a try to keep in touch with family and friends during the seven-month voyage.

After reviewing their extensive account of the trip, I was impressed by the success of these first-time bloggers. Because they were inexperienced, Jim chose

the Blogger site to create and publish the blog. He found it flexible, but initially had some difficulty in the integration of photographs. Once resolved, the blog made extensive use of photography to document the trip. I was surprised to learn that all of the photographs were taken with a simple point-and-shoot 3-megapixel camera. Marge took most of the photos, but crew members from the other boats took some as well. The quality of the images belies the simplicity of the equipment, proving that simple solutions are often best for the beginner. Just as simple was the use of a laptop computer with a wi-fi antenna used to post while in port. Most ports of call had an Internet connection, and if not, the Curleys would use the local library. Jim noted, "The crew was too busy looking for log jams and other debris while traveling to allow blogging under way."

In addition to the complete journal and photographs, Jim included a "Useful Links" section where the reader could immediately access weather, buoy reports, medical assistance, customs, currency conversions, and travel information about the waters and places of interest—a very nice touch.

As a now-accomplished blogger, I asked Jim what advice he would give to a new user setting up a blog for the first time. Here are his suggestions:

Practice before you leave with a blog site to get familiar with the mechanics of posting, and experiment with different formats; it is difficult to change from one format to another once you have started your cruise.

Use lots of photographs and include captions for each one. *(I noticed in Jim's blog that the early photographs were not captioned and later ones were—much more effective).*

Keep in mind the interests of your audience. Don't get bogged down in the minutia of things like fuel burn rates or what you had for breakfast. Include items of local color, history, and background to engage and entertain the reader.

You can take an Alaskan cruise from your armchair by visiting:

http://sites.google.com/site/northtoalaskaadventure2009/Home.

THE INEVITABLE

As a result of this assignment, and in spite of my admitted suspicion of the word "blog," I have set up my own blog site, *Caperboat's Blog*, titled after my boat, which you are welcome to log onto: (http://caperboat.wordpress.com). You will see that I have a start and a great deal of room for growth. Mine is not a cruise site per se, but rather a space in the blogosphere that I hope to fill with experiences, observations, photographs, and some cruising and other nautical trivia that I hope will be of interest to my readers.

I will now share some of the thought processes and experiences that guided my own selection of tools and formats to get started. This is not intended as a "how to" with hard and fast suggestions, but rather as a thought starter to the newly initiated or interested.

Not being a computer expert by any standard, I immediately eliminated the notion of creating my own URL and designing the format for my own site. Maybe someday.

Next, I test drove a number of free sites that are available to determine my ability to comprehend the instructions, the types of formats available, the ease of incorporation of photography, and the ability to receive and include reader comments. I made my choice according to my own priorities and encourage you to do the same.

I combed my contact files for possible interested candidates for readership. I assembled an email list and gave them fair warning, as well as an opportunity to be removed from the list.

Each time I post, I send an email reminder to the remaining list (about 60 at this point) to encourage them to visit the blog and leave a comment. Now this is the frustrating part. I have not had very many comments returned on the post, and don't know how to tell how many have read the material. If not, why write it? It's a lot like a tree falling in the middle of the forest. I am encouraged, however, by experienced bloggers who have taken months to develop a strong following.

Now that I have been at it for a few years, I find that if I am not on a cruise it is difficult to remain on a consistent schedule for posting. A review of my blog will bear that out with sometimes months between entries. This, of course, does not lead to loyal readership. I have a small group (perhaps 20) of regular followers, and I do get occasional comments or email messages from other readers who have been interested in a specific post. Nonetheless, I find it satisfying to have a bully pulpit from which to issue thoughts, photographs, and ideas without the necessity of a formal assignment or publishing schedule.

After following cruising bloggers and their adventures, there is no doubt in my mind that blogging is a valuable tool for family, friends, and the cruising community. It creates a sense of connection that closes the gap when people travel far from home. It is more effective for its purpose than email or cell phone conversations, through the ability to add photographs, video, maps, and other aids to enhance the communication experience. For the cruiser, it also provides a record of an important journey from which a book, album, or slide presentation may be created to help remember a wonderful experience.

Regardless of how involved you choose to get, creating a blog will have an impact on your cruising as well. Here we have only scratched the surface of boats and blogs, not to mention that there are literally millions of blog sites on every imaginable topic. It truly is a brave new world filled with possibilities.