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INTO THE KOS

PLANNING DETAILS OF A YOUNG COUPLE'S TWO-YEAR, ROUND-THE-WORLD DREAM CRUISE

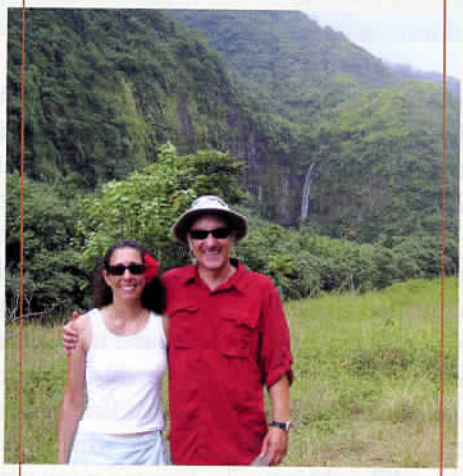
STORY BY SALLY BEE BROWN

Motherly concern crept over me as if these two young people were my own children. In researching a story, those involved become part of me, and I had just received an email from Christi Grab saying that she and her husband, Eric, were proceeding through the Gulf of Aden.

"Fresh attacks in Somalia in the last few weeks," Christi wrote. "Wish us luck."

That wasn't the worst of it. The very next day, our small central Oregon newspaper ran an article about pirates seizing a French luxury yacht off Somalia's coast. Even though it wasn't the Grabs' Nordhavn, *Kosmos,* that had been attacked, I still found the news disconcerting. The previous year, pirates had seized more than two dozen vessels off that coast, although few were smaller private boats, and since then problems had escalated.

Right now, however, pirates weren't the only worry. Christi and Eric were one year into a planned two-year around-the-world trip, and they had just received sad news that Eric's mother was extremely ill with a life-threatening disease. They needed to get to Port Ghalib, Egypt, arrange to leave their beloved boat, and fly home to San Diego to be with Mom. Family concerns and world weather patterns, among other things, would determine the direction of their remarkable journey in the months to come.



MOS

Several days later, I was relieved to hear that the young couple had arrived in Port Ghalib and soon after were back in the States. At this writing, Eric's mother was doing well, and the Grabs had returned to *Kosmos*.

Plans for this cruise had begun in 2003, when Christi was 29 and Eric 33. They cast off in April 2007. Eric's background is in computer science and software engineering, which partly explains the detailed and elaborate blog they've kept the entire trip (at kosmos.liveflux.net/blog/). They've already recounted their travel adventures on the Internet, but what hasn't been told is the story's beginning. How does a trip like this happen for a couple just coming into their settling-down years?

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

My niece, Jenny Foley, who is a friend of Christi's, told me of the Grabs' intended trip when talk first heated up. I didn't pay much attention then, because such a huge plan—at any age—doesn't often make it past flight of fancy, and Christi and Eric were so young to pull it all together. But when they signed the contract for a new Nordhavn 43, they certainly were a major step closer.

They'd yet have to educate themselves about the boat, choose appropriate and affordable equipment, and learn how to care for and potentially repair every component. They needed to gain knowledge in navigation, piloting, safety, ports of call, weather patterns, and tons more: an overwhelming task for most anyone.

There were their jobs to consider. House. Possessions. Leaving loved ones. Some family members and friends agreed this was a grand and doable dream. Others thought they had veered way off course. Why, when their friends were putting down roots, buying homes, and birthing babies, would the couple want to postpone such things? Opinions from all directions swirled around them like eddies.

"I thought for sure they'd be swallowed up in the ocean," says Jennifer Simmons, Christi's sister. "I think they were offended when people said they would never pull off such a crazy thing." When Christi and Eric began taking their numerous classes, Jennifer figured they'd find the material too difficult and would cancel their plans, but that didn't happen. Over time, loved ones' moods mellowed. "Now I hardly even worry about them," says Jennifer.

Fred and Sonia Grab, Eric's parents, were quite concerned when they first heard of the planned voyage. How safe would their son and daughter-in-law be? How safe was the boat? How sad that the couple wouldn't be at family gatherings for such a long time. Eric and Christi's vast research impressed the parents,

though, and eased their minds somewhat. "We've kept in contact by phone and have enjoyed all the blogs about their many port stops and adventures," says Fred.

And then there were the finances. These were not wealthy young people. This was a hardworking couple facing typical challenges.

Although Christi and Eric thought they had plenty of time to untangle the financial knots, all did not go smoothly. First, they needed to sell their 28-foot Bayliner, a boat Eric had purchased in 2000. They also had to decide what to do with a rental property, a matter that became more complicated when their tenant's checks stopped arriving. By law, the Grabs had to wait 90 days before proceeding with eviction. "So, we got no rent on the place all summer, and floating the mortgage and Bayliner payment while trying to save for our upcoming *Kosmos* down payment was not working," says Christi. The whole tenant thing became a nightmare, and by the time the dust bunnies settled, the selling market had slipped like a shoe on an icy gangplank.

Their Nordhavn financing deadline approached, with neither the Bayliner nor the rental house moving—both of which had to sell if the Grabs were to qualify for the

Paul Mirto

boat loan. But timely miracles reached out for the couple. It came down like this, says Christi: "Sold the rental house on Thursday, sold the Bayliner on Friday, and signed the *Kosmos* loan on Monday." This dream was meant to happen.

As plans progressed, my excited niece would send me an occasional update. When she went to the Grabs' bon voyage party, my antennae twitched, but I didn't hone in on their journey for another seven or eight months. Then, I could no longer ignore the couple's perseverance.

WHY NOW?

Christi always had fed her roaming bug, venturing to a number of countries prior to hooking up with Eric. "My dream was to buy an around-the-world plane ticket and take a year off to travel," she says.

Christi didn't have an easy childhood, and, in her younger adulthood, she cared for her dying mother. She also watched her mom's lifelong aspirations disintegrate as her illness progressed. "She waited for those dreams to fall into her lap, or only halfheartedly pursued them," says Christi. With that, Christi's mother taught her far more than either of them realized.

"Maybe it contributed to Christi's willingness to take risks or to do today what others might put off until the future," says her friend Jenny Foley.

Christi met Eric during the summer of 1999. He had knocked about some, although not much abroad. But Eric did have a passion: boats.

With the Bayliner, his mission was to have a gathering place for family and friends, but he soon discovered the boat wasn't big enough to hold as many people as he wished. He eyed a 36-foot Carver and took Christi to a boat show to see if she liked it, too. She did. As they continued browsing at the show, they stepped aboard a Nordhavn 40, and Christi got her first lesson on vessels that can take to the high seas. Because long working hours nipped at their precious time on the Bayliner, they decided it wasn't prudent to invest in something else they wouldn't have time to use.

When the couple got engaged in 2003, Christi's around-the-world dream surfaced with gusto. Her mother's passing at age 59 showed Christi there weren't any promises for tomorrow; there's only now. Right after her mom died, Christi says she "got so sucked into work that I didn't even take vacations

anymore." (She and a partner owned a mortgage brokerage at the market's height.)

Eric listened to her goals, and, although he liked the idea of traveling, he wasn't wild about spending a year living out of a suitcase. After serious thought, he came back with a counteroffer. He suggested they take a trip by boat, so as to have their home with them: their own stuff, their own food, their own place to rest their heads. Christi took to it like a bird to a song.

As he began researching, Eric had serious trepidations. "It appeared that unless you had 25 years of experience and lots of money, you could not venture more than five miles offshore and live to tell about it," he says. Yet, most slow-plan preparations taken by older, more settled couples were not for him. "I'm an instant gratification kind of guy."

Photo courtesy of Christi Grab

Christi and Eric take a tour of Phang Nga Bay, Thailand, canoeing through emerald lagoons lined with limestone cliffs that offer endless tunnels and caves for exploring.

Eric and Christi wanted to take on this adventure at their own pace, educate themselves about the world, and do it while they were still young and able to experience the whole picture. They had a limited window of time before they would need to start a family and before their own parents might require more help. It was now or never.

Powerboats beat sail in their interests, but Eric had trouble finding a boat he felt could handle the excursion they were planning. "This is where we got really lucky," says Christi. "Blessed."

HULL NUMBER 18

Nordhavn had just come out with a 43-footer, and the Grabs learned they could order one, pick their hull number, and have it arrive in a couple of years. While the boat was being built, they'd have time to gather their finances, educate themselves, and tend to the myriad details.

A Nordhavn 43? When Christi and Eric had seen the slightly smaller Nordhavn at the boat show, they'd been skeptical that the boat was right for them. "But seeing it was a little seed that months later was watered and fertilized and began to grow," says Eric.

They laugh when they remember the day they walked into Nordhavn's Dana Point, California, sales office, saying they had just gotten engaged and wanted to buy a boat and travel around the world. Yeah, sure. "They couldn't have possibly taken us seriously, because we are as far from their typical buyers as you can get," says Christi.

Jeff Merrill, their Nordhavn sales rep, takes the approach that he isn't capable of determining which tire-kicker will buy, so he treats everyone alike. It's a good policy; otherwise, the Grabs might have slipped through his fingers.

For Christi and Eric, it was the personalities and caring of the Nordhavn people that sealed the deal. They found that buying a boat from Nordhavn was like buying one from a close family member.

The Grabs attacked their goals like piranhas do prey, working as a team. "Eric definitely has always had Christi's partnership in this project, and I think this has been one of the bonds that has kept their dream glued together," says Jeff. He says that when a couple buy a boat, he normally sees "one as the driver, the other along for the ride," at least in the beginning. Not so here.

Eric and Christi drove to Dana Point when the first Nordhavn 43 arrived, at which time they had a month to make a final decision: would they commit, turning their refundable deposit into a nonrefundable one? They loved what they saw in hull number 1. In mid-2004, they signed to have their boat built. They continued to drive up to Dana Point to see each new 43 arrive (and even to see Nordhavns in other sizes), discussing what worked for them and what they'd like to do differently.

In spite of both Christi and Eric working 50 or more hours a week, their boating education schedule didn't slow down. They flew to Ft. Lauderdale to attend Nordhavn Atlantic Rally group seminars. The courses taught them a lot and proved pivotal to their forward momentum.

Then, combining a flight to Europe with a business trip for Eric, they traveled to Spain to cruise with Scott and Mary Flanders, who were touring on their

Nordhavn 46 (see "The Voyage of Egret," *PMM* Aug. '07). Scott, a boatbuilder, gave Eric and Christi a condensed lesson. "He began at the tip of the bow and methodically moved his way back through the boat, explaining every little detail of maintenance, repairs, and more," says Eric.

Jeff believes these two trips exemplified the couple's dedication to learning all they could about cruising the world. Both excursions cost them in missed work time and out-of-pocket expenses, meaning less money for the *Kosmos* coffers, but would pay off later.

strengthened their relationship as they intently focused each move and decision toward achieving their dream.

Jenny Foley watched her friend Christi juggle multiple balls, a necessary skill when one is working more than full time and dealing with preparations of this enormity. Putting off a family weighed heavy on Christi and was a common topic of conversation, particularly with Jenny being a devoted mom.

When Eric began planning their route, he came to the realization their trip would take two years, not one. That meant even more cutting back and recalculating.

Photos by Jeff Merrill

Left: Finding proper storage for supplies on the long voyage is a continuous problem. When the Grabs come up with the perfect place for something, they have to figure out what to do with the stockpile they've just removed from the same spot. Right: Eric and Christi needed a state-of-the-art helm station, particularly for the long crossings and lonely watches.

Nordhavn worked out a payment schedule according to what Eric and Christi said they could handle, for both the down payment and per month. "And they've made every payment on time," says Jeff.

The Grabs kept track of their boat's construction progress by email and through digital photography.

Jeff remembers how the pair balked at his suggestion to add air conditioning to the boat; they thought they'd be all right without it. But it is a component that's difficult to add after the fact, so, finally, they agreed. "I have since learned from them that I get thanked almost every day for insisting they include it," says Jeff.

MEETING OTHER DEMANDS

The couple married later in 2003, and right from the get-go they saved their money. They ate out less and purchased only necessities. "Our rule of thumb was we couldn't buy anything that wasn't going to come on the boat with us," says Christi. Zeroing in on a common goal

"My coworkers made fun of me for driving an 11-year-old car and living in a tiny house when everyone around me was driving fancy cars and buying nice homes," says Christi. Eric even turned down promotions because he knew he wouldn't be around to fulfill the duties.

Eric's degree in computer science helped him immensely in the research and education process, and in understanding a complicated boat. It became an almost daily habit "to get online and go through a routine of checking boating forums, downloading manuals, reading about others' experiences, looking at news and statistics," he says. He could see the Internet contained inaccuracies that had to be weeded out and required a constant verification process. More than two years of reading *PMM* helped, too. Eric says he read each issue cover to cover and marked the articles he believed Christi should read.

His coworkers became his sounding board and went on to be among his greatest supporters. "They watched me struggle with costs and trade-offs."

"I had to give him credit for leaving no stone unturned," says Jeff.

While single, Christi had purchased a small, older home, and that's where the couple lived prior to their trip. When cruising plans developed, all work on the house stopped, as time and finances went into the adventure. Christi's sister and brother-in-law would become tenants upon the Grabs' departure, so there were none of the financial or deadline worries involved with needing to sell the house.

KOSMOS ARRIVES

Jeff Merrill was (and still is) a tremendous help to the Grabs. They consider him the best and most professional salesperson they've ever met. Jeff worked hard to see that they knew what they were doing and would have a safe vessel to do it in. Before Nordhavn owners christen a new boat, Jeff christens them with a week's worth of intensive training. At delivery, the Grabs' instruction began with an initial run out to sea to pass ownership to one of the youngest couples ever to purchase a new Nordhavn. Tony Cozad was the delivery captain hired to do the insurance sign-off on Eric's abilities.

They continued training for another couple days while the commissioning crew finished the last details. Then they took a day trip to Catalina for a shakedown cruise, running fuel tests, checking and rechecking all systems, practicing mooring, anchoring, and paravane launching, and getting a feel for how to live in their new space.

Commissioning is an ideal time to learn the ins and outs of a boat—after she's arrived and workers are tearing into her to check various systems and add final items. Having everything done right was more important to the Grabs than having Nordhavn stick to a timetable, so they let workers perform at their own pace.

Jeff took photographs almost daily. "When the Grabs were on the boat, we would talk about one system at a time and trace it from start to finish," he says.

At possession, there still was a year to go until their departure date. Christi and Eric needed to spend as much time aboard as possible and take short trips to study all the workings of their vessel. Jeff says this is fundamental and obvious—but not common. "I have seen where a new owner becomes obsessed with perfection and spends all of his or her time making the boat great, but not using the boat."

During their prep year, their longest cruise was to Ensenada, Mexico, to store *Kosmos* for the winter. Jeff went along.

For another 80-hour, basically nonstop venture, they cruised up to Dana Point, picked up Jeff, and headed for the Channel Islands, off the Southern California coast. Choppy seas gave them a dose of reality as they slogged along. For three days Jeff coached them, Eric took notes, and they learned much that they would need to know for long passages. "I think we made a very smooth transition from new boat owners to ready-to-go passagemakers," Jeff says.

Pages flew quickly off the calendar. Christi set up automatic bill paying, a service she couldn't have done without. They sold enough stock to have cash at hand for the entire trip. Or so they thought. Sometimes, things happen: skyrocketing fuel prices, unexpected trips home, devaluation of the U.S. dollar, costs that are higher than what's listed in the travel books. Christi and Eric didn't paint themselves into the proverbial corner, though. They set up financial reserves before they left and also had the option of Eric doing extra work for his company remotely as they cruised.

It took the couple more than three years to put together a two-year trip, and they did it by taking a methodical approach: talking about their dream, studying how they could make it happen, and then meticulously and confidently making plans. How much better to work toward a desire instead of just wishing! "We get very fed up with people who tell us we're lucky to be able to do this," says Christi. "This trip had nothing to do with luck. That is for sure."

FINALLY!

Eric and Christi scheduled a spring 2007 departure date, and then rescheduled it when life got in the way. Everything was so hectic, including the day before their new departure date, when Christi was confronted with a banking snag. They didn't want to postpone their bon voyage party once again, but Eric did consider waving goodbye on the big day, casting off, and then sneaking back home to finish a few things. Yet there comes a time in any plan when one has to quit preparing and simply carry it out. That's where the Grabs were.

Banking problem solved. Last-minute boat stocking done. Let's go.

They encouraged friends and family to keep in touch, to call on the satphone, or send short emails. They set up their blog, on which anyone could make comments or ask questions. Everyone who attended their final dock party received a trip detail sheet, allowing them to follow along on the journey. As Christi and Eric warmed up the engine, they thanked everyone for their help, and Eric added drolly, "It has been a real adventure so far, and we haven't even left the dock."

On April 28, 2007, they pointed their bow toward the Pacific Ocean and put *Kosmos* in gear.

NORDHAVN 43 *KOSMOS*

LOA	43'
LWL	38' 4"
BEAM	14' 10"
DRAFT	4' 11"
DISPLACEMENT	54,540 lb. (full load)
BRIDGE CLEARANCE	35'
FUEL	1,250 U.S. gal.
WATER	300 U.S. gal.
HOLDING TANK	50 U.S. gal.
GRAY WATER	50 U.S. gal.
MINIMUM CABIN HEADROOM	6' 2"
GENERATOR	9kW Northern Lights
ENGINE	105hp Lugger LP668D (standard); 27hp Yanmar wing engine
MAXIMUM SPEED	8.5 knots
CRUISE SPEED	5–7 knots
RANGE AT CRUISE SPEED	3,000nm (approximate)
DESIGNER	Jeff Leishman
BUILDER	Pacific Asian Enterprises/Nordhavn

The first leg was their longest one, and really tough for them, but it broke them in fast. From San Diego to the Marquesas Islands, the Grabs had fellow Nordhavn owner Richard Burkland help them out as crew, rotating four-hour watches among the three of them. It made the difficult crossing much easier, as Richard was experienced and took to rough seas much better than the Grabs. "He was functioning well when we were miserable," admits Christi. Richard had firsthand experience, while Christi and Eric had theory and schooling, all of which meshed together well.

During the crossing, Christi was shocked and depressed by how lethargic she felt. Those first three weeks, her brain was geared to accomplishing things, but her body wouldn't cooperate. "I could do absolutely nothing whatsoever that involved moving in any way," she admits. By day 14 she often was teary-eyed and says she would have done absolutely anything to get the boat to stop rocking for a while.

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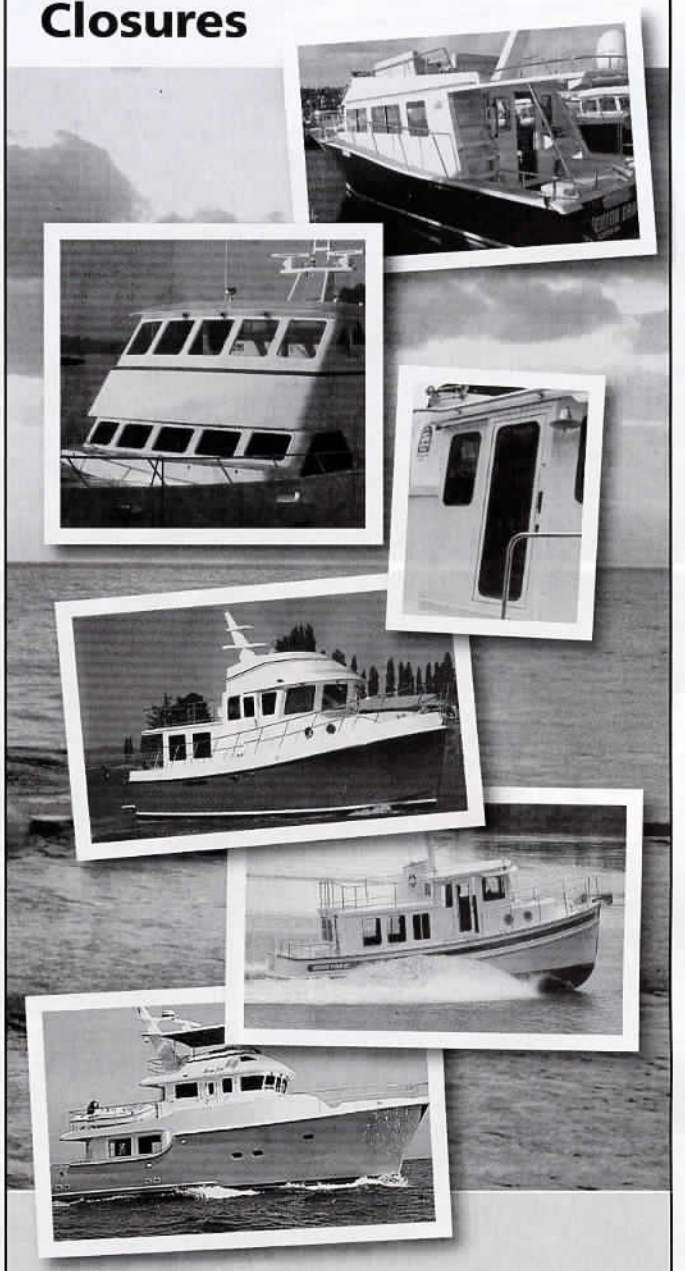

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Photos courtesy of Christi Grab

Top: Huge manta rays, puffer fish, and sea turtles were just a few of the sights that Christi and Eric enjoyed on their dives in Komodo National Park, Indonesia. Above: Shortly after this photo was shot in Phuket, Thailand, Christi and Eric each took a turn at the helm of this 36-year-old elephant.

Eric didn't find it easy, either, but he didn't develop depression like Christi did. Some think her symptoms were another form of seasickness. Throughout the crossing, though, they were never scared, just exhausted from the constant rough conditions.

Although two years seems like a long time, Christi and Eric consider themselves to be on a tight schedule. They can't always wait for perfect conditions to leave port. "We have to go when it is good enough," says Christi.

When they reached the halfway point of their trip—as far from home as they could get—it was a prideful time for them. Has it been all they've wanted? Mostly, yes. For one stretch in the South Pacific, they thought of chucking the whole thing, as rough seas pounded them relentlessly. But when they hit land, they were so in awe of the beauty of their surroundings that any negative thoughts flew out the portholes. They played tourist with all the comforts of home. And calmer seas soon showed them they could enjoy crossings, too.

There still are those times when waves are smashing at their hull or something hasn't gone well on shore. But those are inevitably followed by days that greet them with open arms, in which they find themselves never wanting to return to "normal" life. Often, Christi and Eric would like to move slower, to stay somewhere long enough to integrate into the culture, rather than having to pick up and move on.

As far as preparations they might have done differently, they say there are very few. A couple of minor equipment changes, maybe, presuming affordability, but all of their prep work appears to have paid off royally.

LOOKING FORWARD

After their trip home to see Eric's ill mother, the Grabs were again called to California. Eric's company wanted him back for a three-week project. It was good timing, because Christi's relatives had moved out of the home they'd been renting from the couple.

Christi had plenty to keep her occupied while Eric was at work. She packed up all the things they'd been keeping at the house, put them in storage, found new tenants, changed mailing addresses, and more.

"Eric got his project done a couple hours before we got on the plane. I got the house done an hour before Eric finished," says Christi. Their new tenants moved in the next day. This couple has a knack for timing.

Making two unplanned trips home hasn't changed the Grabs' target date for ending their cruise, which is still April 2009. But it did force them to cut out several countries on their itinerary.

Christi and Eric say that although removing themselves

from their daily lives and responsibilities has been much harder than they had expected, the longer they are out on the boat, the easier it is to be away.

While gone, Eric has retained job seniority with his video software company by doing a minimum amount of work (four hours a month) from *Kosmos*. With the economic downturn, Christi had closed her mortgage business prior to hitting the waterways. What she'll pursue back home in San Diego is yet unknown.

When they do return, they may live aboard for a while until they decide whether to keep or sell *Kosmos*. While preparing for their voyage, when they were living at home and spending weekends on the boat, Eric and Christi learned that paying for and maintaining two living spaces is not a good thing. It leaves no time for recreation.

SAVORING LIFE

In his "From the Pilothouse" column last April, *PMM* Founding Editor Bill Parlatore suggested, "There is something special about a young couple who follow a different beat, who put off jobs and children and responsibilities of the 'real world' to...savor life on a simpler level."

Perhaps the Grabs' huge endeavor doesn't qualify as living life "on a simpler level," but the philosophy rings true. *Kosmos* is Greek for "world," which, of course, fits perfectly as Christi and Eric venture around the globe. Franz Kafka discussed cosmos as an infinite expanse made possible by laborious creation and free self-determination. Those words certainly come to mind when describing Eric and Christi and their ambitious voyage.

Now, at the ripe old ages of 35 and 39, Christi and Eric feel blessed that Nordhavn came into their lives, along with all the people who guided them.

"But we would have saved our money and bought the best boat we could afford, no matter what," says Christi. "And we would have done this trip, no matter what." That's called old-fashioned tenacity, and Eric and Christi have plenty of that, too.

If you have, or know of, a worthy boating story with an emphasis on the people involved, please email Sally at sallybee@boaternw.com.

To learn more about the Grabs' predeparture education, see the Web Extras for this issue at passagemaker.com.