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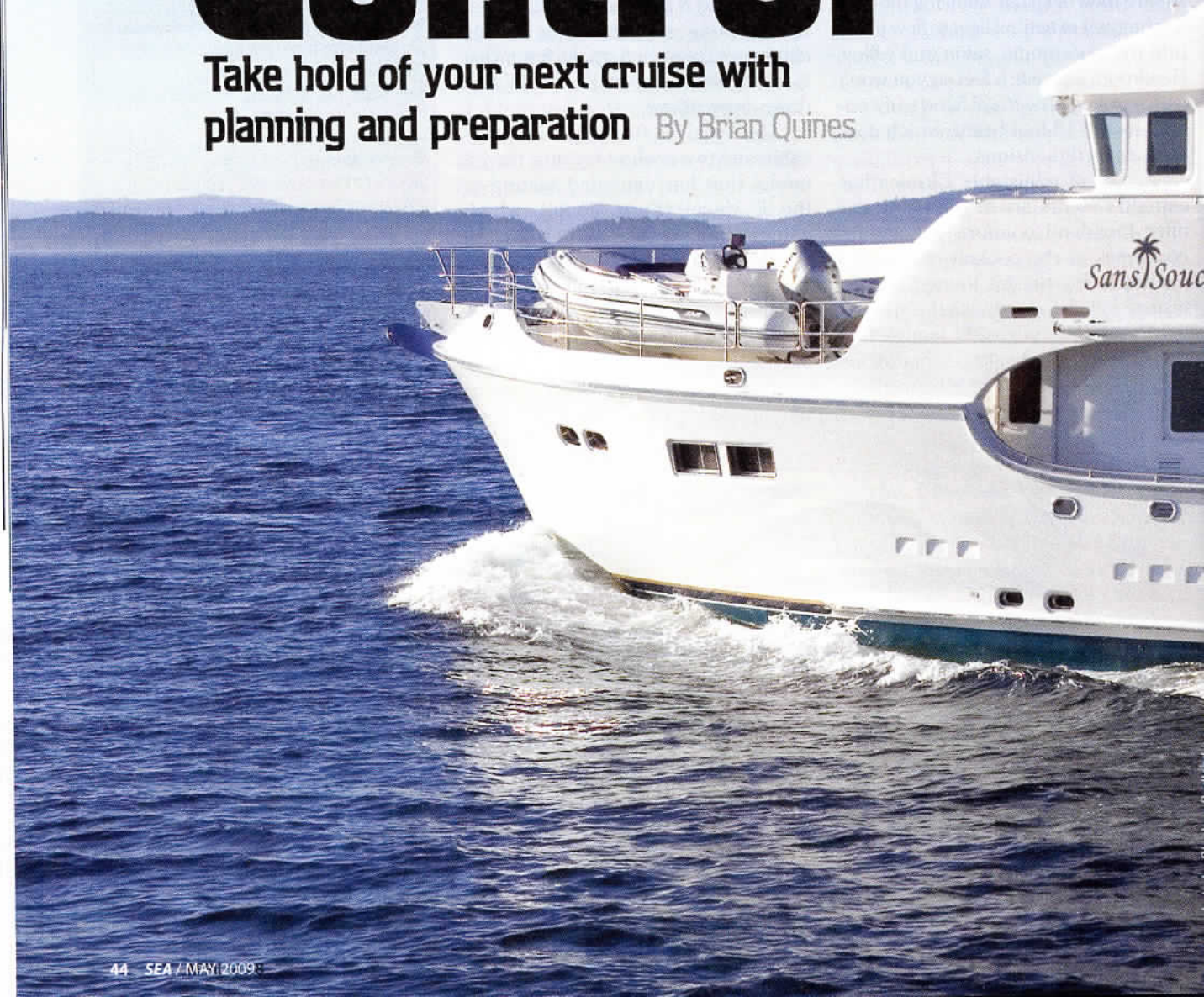
Cruise Control

Take hold of your next cruise with planning and preparation

By Brian Quines



When you go to Mexico, you won't find too many "boaters." But there are plenty of "cruisers." The distinction between boaters and cruisers is just as clear as a glass of Alka-Seltzer. What is clear is that many boaters want to "cruise" on their boats. The transition from boater to cruiser can be an uneasy one. For Ken and Roberta Williams, of Seattle, Washington, the transition meant the couple had to leave the comfort of seeing shore all the time. It meant they had to test their physical and mental ability to manage and navigate a boat on their own. Becoming cruisers meant the couple had to understand international customs laws and learn foreign languages.

Ken and Roberta started the cruising chapter of their lives the easy way – by joining a Nordhavn Atlantic Rally to cross the Atlantic Ocean. The cruising group acted as a guide for the couple to learn the ins and outs. The couple gained the confidence needed to set up their first trip on their own. "After crossing the Atlantic, everything else is easy," Ken said. Immediately after the Atlantic trip, Ken started planning a 4,000-mile cruise from Seattle to Costa Rica. The trip would stop in a half-dozen countries and into territory Ken and Roberta had never experienced.

The four-month adventure (which includes breaks back to Seattle) took several months to plan. And Ken was forced to take a crash course in international customs, banditos, pirates (or lack thereof in their case), howling winds and the great beaches along the south that make Central America one of the most popular cruising destinations for cruisers along the west coast and beyond.

Here are some tips from Ken on boating from San Diego to Costa Rica. In next month's issue of *Sea* Magazine, Ken reveals some of the best side trips, marinas, ports and restaurants he discovered on the 4,000-mile adventure.

photo by Stephen Cridland

4,000 miles in four months: What we learned

photo by Stephen Cridland

Rally in a rally

Ken and Roberta's first extended cruise was on a Nordhavn Atlantic Rally. All of the logistics, international customs and other details were well explained in a 200-page manual that covered every nook and cranny of the trip. Not only did this make the trip easy, but it also gave Ken and Roberta a great foundation for future trips. The group also made the couple feel safer since this was their first time being out of sight of a shoreline.

Habla Espanõl?

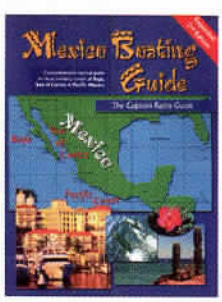
If you don't know it, learn. You may get lucky and find an English-speaking harbormaster in Mexico or Central America, but many of the ports' employees only speak Spanish. The

Making the transition from boater to cruiser can be challenging. It often means leaving the comfort of seeing shore all of the time, testing your physical and mental abilities and understanding international customs and laws. For some it even means learning a foreign language.

language barrier can cause huge delays in clearing into a new country or port. Luckily, Roberta is fluent in Spanish. Unfortunately, Ken often found himself talking Spanglish when Roberta wasn't around.

Help, I need somebody

When traveling south beyond Mexico into Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, there are very few published books or guides. The best source for advice is message boards. Ken used Passagemaker Under Power and Yahoo Groups Southbound to get travel information. For trips through Mexico, Ken used Charlie's Charts and books written by Capt. Pat Rains.



Moolah

Expect to spend roughly $200 just in fees for entering and exiting each country, plus $80-$200 per night in moorage fees. Popular and ritzy destinations, including Los Suenos, may cost you double in moorage fees. And the food will be more expensive too.

Try it, you might like it

The first trip was an eye-opener for Ken and Roberta. The biggest lesson they learned after their first cruise was they CAN do it, along with the accomplishment for cruising alone.

Pointing a gun to your... engine

Perform engine checks with a temperature gun (available at most hard-

photo by Ken Williams

ware stores) frequently when under way. Ken used his gun to quickly check different parts of the engine room, including the shafts, transmission and hydraulic cooling tank. During one leg of the trip one of his transmissions was 40 degrees hotter. After swapping the hydraulic pump from one transmission to the other, the problem was solved. If he hadn't found the problem, the consequences could have been great.

photo by Ken Williams

Goof off

Have fun at anchor and stay in a place that you enjoy. Cruising is about having fun. Don't rush it.

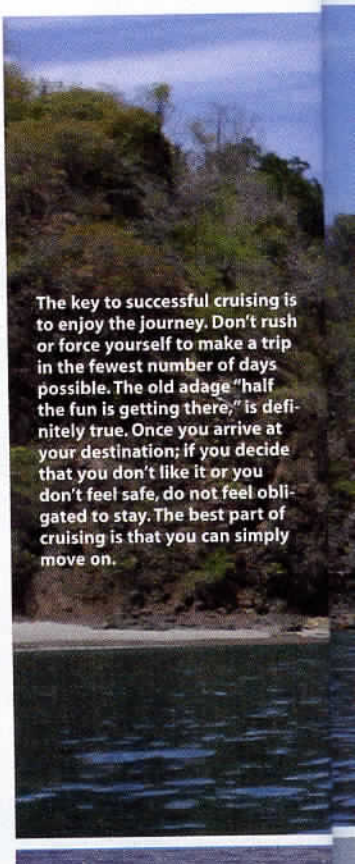
All clear

Clearing into Mexico can potentially take a full day. Clearing out of Mexico may take up to two days if you're not prepared. Ken learned this the hard way. Check out your cruising guide to make sure you know where to get all of the papers to clear out properly.

KEN AND ROBERTA

- **Names:** Ken and Roberta Williams
- **Hometown:** Seattle, Washington
- **Jobs:** He is a retired software engineer and former CEO of Sierra On-Line, a video game company. She is a retired video game designer who worked on games including "King's Quest" and "Phantasmagoria." They both retired early.
- Ken has written two books, "Crossing an Ocean Under Power" and "Cruising Under Power, Mexico and Central America."
- **Their boat:** Nordhavn 68 named *Sans Souci*
- **Previous boats owned:** Nordhavn 62 and a 27-foot power cat
- **Their dog:** Shelby, a Norwegian Lundehund. The dog goes where the Williams go. If there is a country where dogs are a hassle to bring in, Ken and Roberta will simply not go there. *Sans Souci* even has a doggy door that leads into the main cabin.

Read Ken's blog: www.nordhavn68.com



The key to successful cruising is to enjoy the journey. Don't rush or force yourself to make a trip in the fewest number of days possible. The old adage "half the fun is getting there," is definitely true. Once you arrive at your destination; if you decide that you don't like it or you don't feel safe, do not feel obligated to stay. The best part of cruising is that you can simply move on.

photos by Ken Williams

ABOUT THE BOAT

photo by Stephen Cridland

Sans Souci, a Nordhavn 68

- **WHY A 68?** Ken and Roberta wanted a boat that was large enough to be comfortable on extended cruises, but small enough so they can both handle it on their own. Previously, they owned a Nordhavn 62, but wanted to upgrade to a larger master stateroom, a hot tub on the flybridge, a stand-up engine room and a larger deck behind the pilothouse so they can entertain more guests.
- **ENGINE:** Twin Lugger 1276A 340 hp. The engine will get about 10 percent less range compared to other engines and it takes up a little more space in the engine room, but twin 1276A power is more maneuverable and dependable, which outweighed the few negatives.

■ **GENERATORS:** One 25 kw in the engine room and a 16 kw in the lazarette. Ken almost went with two 25 kw generators but wanted a smaller one that was a little less noisy when they needed some quiet time. There is also a 14 kw inverter on board so Ken and Roberta can run air conditioning (a nice creature comfort in Central America), electric barbecues and other small items without firing up a generator.

■ **FOOD STORAGE:** Extra freezer underneath a bunk in the pilothouse. It's nice to have extra storage for perishable items, especially on extended cruises.

■ **AIR CONDITIONING:** Chilled water system instead of conventional air conditioning. Despite the extra cost and the extra space a chilled system requires, Ken wanted something that wouldn't transport odors (especially from the engine room) around the boat. A chilled system eliminates the problem.

■ **COOKING:** Electric instead of propane. Propane is a fire hazard and the nozzles to propane tanks can be different in foreign countries – making it hard to refill the bottle at some ports.

■ **INTERNET:** Fleet 77 system. Although it is slow speed, the dome is much smaller than the 4-foot dome needed to get high bandwidth. Since many marinas offer high-speed Internet, Ken decided on a smaller, simpler kit that can feed his Internet needs while at sea.

photos by Ken Williams

Lessons Learned Along the Way

Ken was incessant about updating his blog, www.nordhavn68.com, originally built for family and friends to keep up with his latest adventures. To his surprise, hundreds of boaters visited the site in search of cruising tips and boat maintenance tricks. Here are some lessons learned while Ken was at sea in Costa Rica:

Quirky Rules From Quirky Countries

A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND IF YOU PLAN ON VISITING THESE PLACES.

CANADA – has a duty fee for wine. All wine must be inspected and a heavy-duty fee is attached if you bring wine into the country. Ken plans on passing through Canada on a future circumnavigation trip. He may ship the wine to Alaska and load it after he visits Canada to bypass the extra fees.

SIBERIA – some ports may charge for moorage, a pilot boat, a 24-hour security guard and line handlers. You can handle your own line, but they'll still charge you for the handler.

Take your time: Cruise for fun, not work. And don't try to make the trip in the fewest days possible. "Our goal for this journey is to be in the best places at the best times," Ken said. If you don't like a place, or if you think it's too dangerous, don't feel obligated to stay there. Just move on.

Cruiser Net: Found on Channel 22 in Mexico. Every morning at 7:30, more than 50 cruisers in the area tap into Cruiser Net. The cruisers offer trip reports, weather reports, tips on restaurants and invitations for rendezvous if any other cruiser happens to be in the area. Immigration issues and a question and answer session are also part of the daily radio meeting.

Papers for the pooch: Bring immunization and birth certificate papers for your pet. Shelby, the Williams' dog, had no problems getting into Mexico or any of the other countries on the Costa Rica trip. There were no problems in France, Portugal, Spain, Canada and Bermuda. Some countries, including Polynesia, require a 30-day quarantine. Research the laws in the place you plan on cruising.

Internet telephone service: VoIP services including Skype and Magic Jack can help trim your hefty international cell phone bill. Now that many marinas offer high-speed Internet, VoIP is an even better option if you need to call home.

Careful of "long lines": Long lines are fishing nets that can stretch for miles. These lines are used to dangle hooks in the water. In some parts of Mexico and Central America, these lines are not marked with buoys and can easily wrap around your prop. Long lines off the coast of Guatemala and El Salvador are typically lit up.

Store Google Earth on your computer: Google Earth allows users to create a cache on their computers to store images. You can save these images on your hard drive and reference them when you're at sea without having to access the Internet.

Faster Internet for less: For faster Internet at anchor, use the Hughes 9201 BGAN terminal. It's about the size of a laptop computer and allows you to access the Internet from virtually anywhere in the world. The downside is you have to be sitting still to use it. So in rough weather or under way, it's pretty useless.

Watch out for Russian explosives: A freighter with a blinking red light on top usually means the boat is carrying cargo that may explode. Ken found this out when he encountered a Russian cargo ship with a red blinking light. Ken hailed the vessel and asked what the light meant. A man with a thick Russian accent responded, "It means we are carrying explosives."