A Taste for Blue Water

Milt and Judy Baker

BY JUDITH POWERS

Blue water is a recurring theme in the lives of Milt and Judy Baker. They both grew up near the ocean in Norfolk, Virginia; he had a career in the Navy, and together they owned and operated the well-known Bluewater Bookstore in Fort Lauderdale. Along the way, they've cruised thousands of miles on six different boats, three of which have been named *Bluewater*.

Now, aboard their latest *Bluewater*, a Nordhavn 47, the Bakers and their Schipperke puppy, Katy, sit snug and secure in a Charleston marina while three hurricanes swirl offshore. But on board this substantial, if not imposing, vessel, all is well. And that's just the way they planned it, for their coming blue-water adventure was years in the making and once begun will take them on a four-year trans-Atlantic adventure.

When Milt retired from the Navy as a commander at age 43, he and Judy went cruising. Aboard their 32-foot *Allied Seawind*, they sailed to Bermuda, Maine, and as far south as Grenada, all the while contemplating what they wanted to do next.

"The Navy was a wonderful way to earn a living for 20 years," says Milt. "We had five years in Hawaii and two years in Japan, and then I was put in charge of Pentagon press relations. I wrote lots of speeches and congressional testimony."

But his heart was never far from the water.

As they continued to cruise, summering in Annapolis and Maine and spending winters in the Bahamas, Milt tapped into the management and communications skills he learned in the Navy to ready himself for the couple's next adventure: Bluewater Books and Charts in Fort Lauderdale.

"We knew we wanted to do something in the marine world," recalls Judy. "We always had more books and charts on board our boat than anyone else, so a nautical bookstore seemed like a logical thing."

Not only logical but lucrative, as Bluewater Books became a Fort Lauderdale landmark for cruisers the world over who sought everything from charts and cruising guides to courtesy flags and clocks. The company flourished as Judy served as comptroller and managed the day-to-day store operations while Milt handled marketing, advertising and strategic planning.

They worked a lot, and they worked hard. But as the years went by, the couple began to envy their customers, who would share their memories of distant destinations and extended trips abroad.

Though unable to follow their customers to distant realms, the Bakers were at least able to break away from the shop on a regular basis. "We would take chunks of time off," says Milt, "and take our Grand Banks 42 up to Maine each summer. We had a wonderful time and grew to love the area

around Southwest Harbor."

Their Grand Banks 42, also named *Bluewater*, was but one in a long line of boats for the Bakers. Over the years, they owned a Columbia 22, an Ericson 27, an Allied Seawind II, a Grand Banks 32, the previously mentioned GB 42 and a Nordic Tug 32. But it was the 42 that whet their appetites for long-distance cruising and set the stage for the Nordhavn they had commissioned in the summer of 2005 in Stuart, Florida.

Between them, Milt and Judy have some 40 years of boating experience, but Judy taught Milt to sail. The pair grew up in Norfolk and started dating when they were 17 and 15, respectively. A mutual love of boats was certainly one foundation for the relationship. Says Judy, "I can't imagine what else we would do with our time but boating. It's such a part of our lives."

More than a commitment to a lifestyle, their affinity is "a lifelong avocation," Milt says. Unlike those whom Milt calls "episodic boaters — those who buy a boat, take a cruise, then sell the craft and move on to something else," he and Judy feel that "boating is part of the fabric of our lives. It very much defines who we are, and if you took that out, our lives would be very empty."

Their lives today are anything but empty as they begin the first leg of a four-year adventure that will take them to Venezuela, Bermuda and the Mediterranean. But how and why did they make the leap from the comfort and relative safety of periodic cruising to becoming owners of an 85,000-pound behemoth that they'll pilot across the Atlantic?

Not long after the Bakers sold Bluewater Books in 2000, Nordhavn began making plans for its Atlantic Cruising Rally. Milt agreed to work with his friend Georgs Kolesnikovs on a publication for Nordhavn. During that time, he met Jim Leishman, vice president of Nordhavn, and they began discussing the rally.

"I knew I wanted to be involved," recalls Milt. "I liked everything I saw about Nordhavn: not only the style and quality of the boats themselves, but also management's straightforward attitude about problem solving."

Milt's role in the rally was to act as planner and manager of the event. "I had to make all the arrangements in each of the ports along the way: Bermuda, the Azores and Gibraltar. We started a year in advance."

He visited each stop and met with government and port officials and hotel, restaurant and marina operators to set up accommodations and make arrangements for parties and banquets. Milt also wrote and compiled the 200-page manual used in the rally. His only instructions from Nordhavn brass: "Do whatever you need to do to make it a great rally."

The event was a great marketing success for Nordhavn and a life-changing experience for many who participated, including Milt and Judy. Though they didn't cross the Atlantic on one of the rally vessels, they became Nordhavn converts.

"Seeing the company's employees out on the boats themselves, solving problems and dealing with customer

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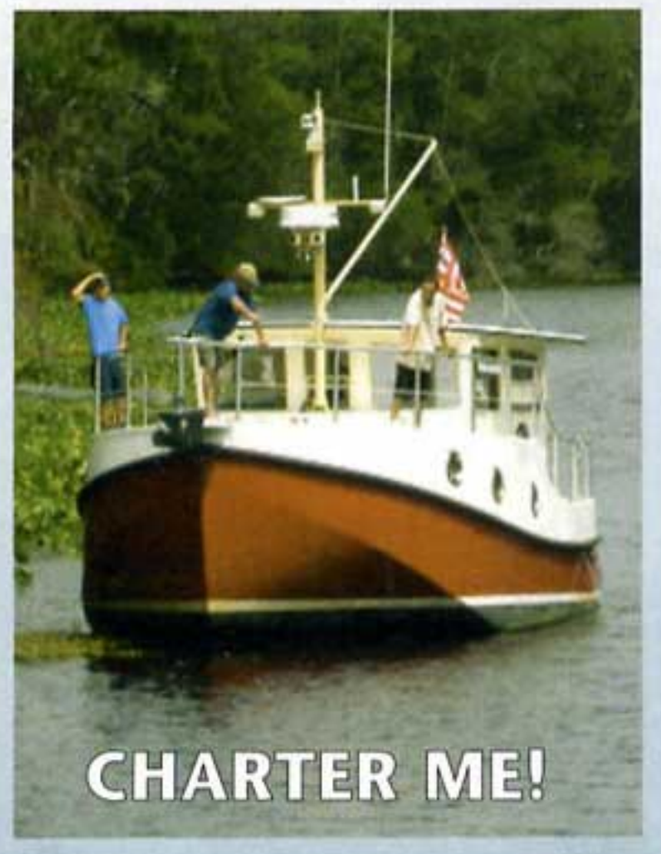

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issues, made me realize what kind of a builder Nordhavn is," recalls Milt. "During that time, I came across a saying that I feel is a great metaphor for Nordhavn: 'You cannot be where you do not go.'"

As their experience with the rally continued, Milt and Judy discovered that they liked not only the boats and the company that built them, but the Nordhavn owners as well. It wasn't long before Milt and Judy knew that they wanted to become Nordhavn owners, too.

"After all," says Milt, "I had the opportunity as part of the prerally inspection committee to research and study everything you'd ever want to know about the boats." That, along with Jim Leishman's offer of a great deal on a boat in exchange for Milt's hard work on the rally, cemented the decision.

At first, the Bakers thought they wanted a Nordhavn 43, but the more they looked and studied, they realized that a 47 would better suit their needs for long-term cruising. Originally, they planned on buying a used boat, but the thought of having their own boat, built just for them, was too much to resist. "Though Nordhavns are essentially production boats, options and changes are allowed and welcomed," says Milt.

Among other changes, the Bakers lowered the height of the microwave in the galley, added an aft steering station, installed a second generator in the engine room and utilized a wet exhaust, the first ever on a 47. They made additional changes in the head system and added a table in the salon and a cabinet over the bed in the master stateroom.

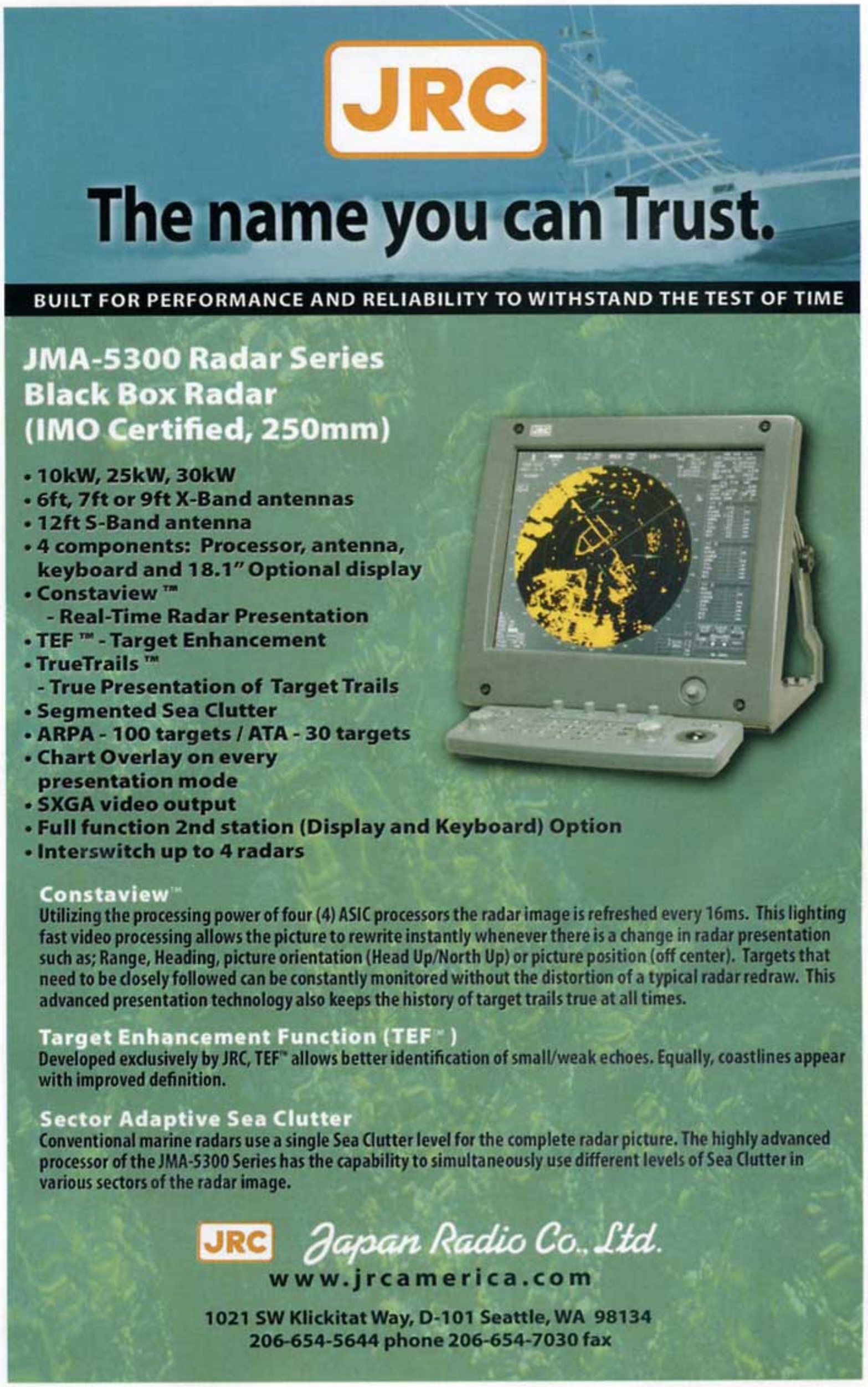
Looking back, the Bakers aren't sure if they'd build another boat or buy a used one. "It's nice to buy a used boat because you know exactly what you're getting," says Judy. "And buying a used boat is easier. When you're building something new, you invariably pay more than you think you will, and it takes longer than you expect. I'd build another if that was the only way to get a 47, but if I saw a good used one on the market, I'd be tempted," she confesses.

The lack of available used 47s was also a key factor in the Bakers' decision to build from the ground up. "We really liked the fact that the 47 is state of the art for Nordhavn, as is the 55," says Milt. "Now the boats have evolved so there are significant changes in the new series. Not that the older ones aren't good boats," he says, "but the newer technology in the engine room and the greater reliability of plumbing and fuel systems appealed to us."

With hull No. 32, Milt thinks that *Bluewater* may be near the "sweet spot" in production for the 47 line. "But then, maybe owners of hull No. 40 or 50 will think that their boats are the best of the line. Who knows?" he says.

One thing Milt strongly recommends for owners building new boats is a trip to the factory. "You'll return with a greater appreciation of the care and quality that goes into building your boat," he says.

Milt traveled to Xiamen, China, and spent a few days with Nordhavn workers and management just two weeks before his boat was shipped. "Only about 20 percent of new owners make the



tiring trip," says Milt, "but I got the opportunity to enjoy marvelous Chinese hospitality and thank the 400 workers for building me a wonderful boat."

The Bakers' cruising plan, "cast in Jell-O," according to Milt, is to spend this fall in the Chesapeake, then go south to Beaufort, North Carolina, and head offshore to Porto La Cruz, Venezuela, for the winter. Then, come spring, it's up through the Caribbean to Bermuda, then to Southwest Harbor, Maine, for the summer. In the spring of 2007, *Bluewater* will cross the Atlantic to the Mediterranean and spend the next three or four years there. The couple plan to follow in the wake of the Nordhavn Atlantic Rally, with stops in Bermuda and the Azores.

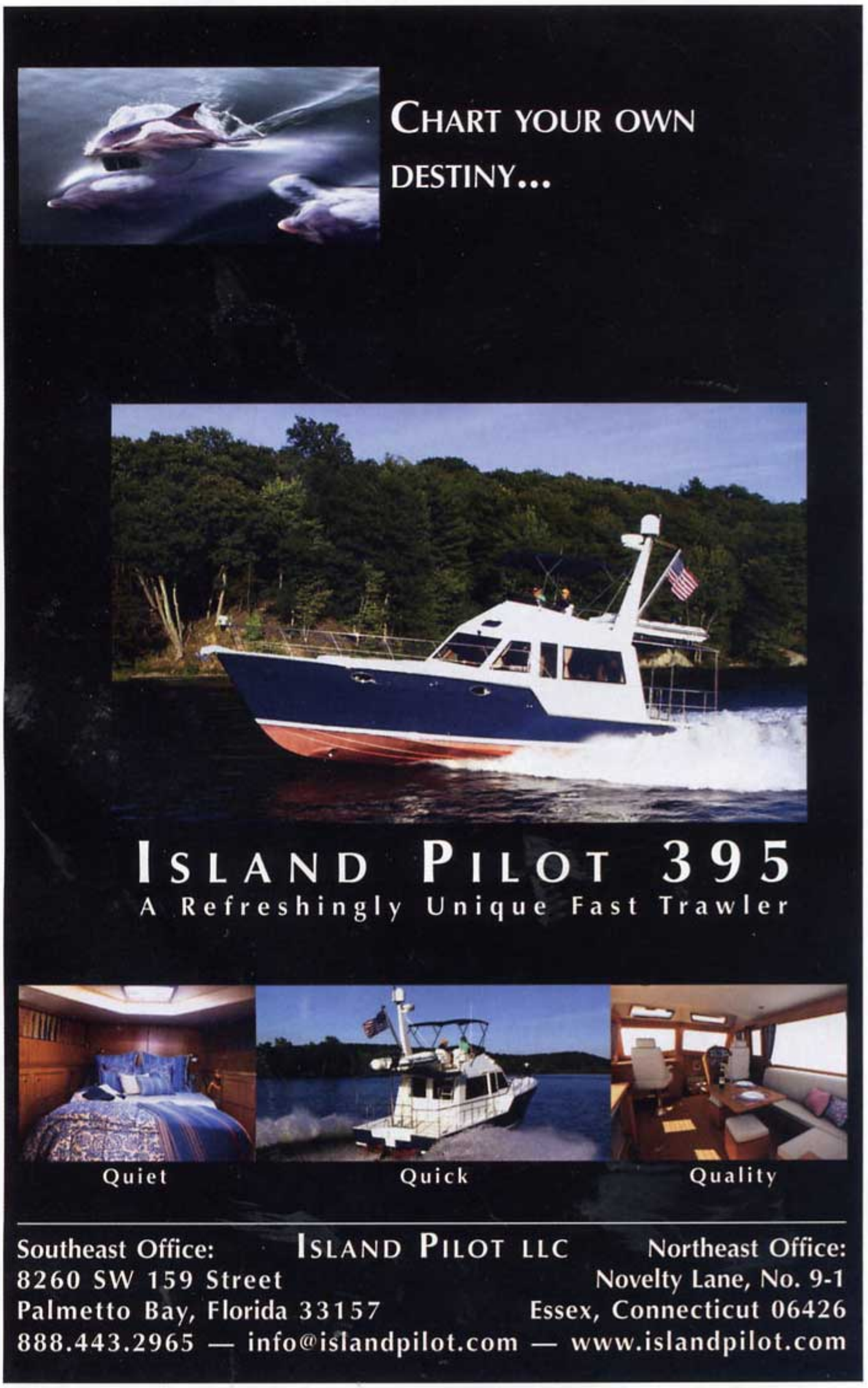
"Our style of cruising is a little different from most people's," reveals Milt. "Rather than move from point to point, we like to find a place and make it into our temporary home. Southwest Harbor is that place for us in Maine. It gives us a sense of permanence and a sense of community. We know where to find groceries, get a haircut and have our mail sent. In the Med, we may choose Rome for our home base or Turkey or maybe Barcelona."

Most would find the thought of two not-very-large, 60-ish people taking a 51-foot (LOA) vessel with a 16-foot beam and nearly 1,500 gallons of fuel across the Atlantic a bit daunting, perhaps. Not the Bakers. "My biggest concern is that I have the skills it takes to maintain the many onboard systems," says Milt. "But the boat has a lot of redundancy, with instruments, our 'get-home engine,' the second generator and spares for nearly everything."

Judy, on the other hand, says she's not too apprehensive about anything, except that she likes to be in her own place for part of every year. "When you're cruising for six months or so, you really start looking forward to getting home," she says.

"Then, after you're home for a time, you can't wait to go cruising again. Though I've done this before, I wonder about being gone for 15 months without coming home. But we can always fly back." Then she adds with a laugh, "I'd be even more concerned if I thought I was going to be at home forever. That would be a dismal scenario."

What the Bakers are most looking forward to as they embark on this new adventure is the friends they'll see, both old and new. "You meet people along the way, then see them later in other ports," says Judy. "The best friends you make are your cruising friends."

Milt and Judy have a large contingent of friends in the trawler cruising community, so it's not unusual for them to find old friends wherever they go. And with their dog, Katy, they're sure to make friends even more easily as they travel about.

Early dispatches from Milt via e-mail say that *Bluewater* is "one sweet boat." His suggestion to anyone who is considering what he and Judy are about to do is simple, even if somewhat cliché: "Life is short. Get out there and enjoy it; that's what we're trying to do." For the Bakers, it's blue water all the way. ⎈