



The River That Flows Both Ways

A weekend cruise aboard a lovely fantail trawler reveals the many charms of the Lower Hudson River



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I've wanted to motor up the Hudson River for decades. So, when my brother Rik bought a 1989 Transworld 50 Fantail Pilothouse Trawler—the perfect mini-yacht to cruise the Hudson—I proposed a leaf-peeping tour for October.

My brother and his wife, Anne, were headed for Australia that month, but he directed me to their daughter Hannah—my niece—who lives aboard *Consensus* in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Rik had spotted the fantail in the classifieds the previous fall, decided he liked it and proposed a deal to Hannah. If she paid the docking fees and shared the maintenance costs, he would buy the boat to cruise and she could live aboard the rest of the time. Hannah's Manhattan lease was ending, and she'd just been promoted to be the Port Authority's Environmental Specialist for New

Jersey's seaports, which would put her office in Port Newark.

My niece grew up on small boats, canoeing, sailing Lightnings and Wood-Pussys, repairing small craft at her uncle Jimmy's boat shop in the Adirondacks and test driving Rivas and Chris-Crafts. She'd never operated anything above 25 feet, but immediately embraced the idea of living aboard and learning how to operate a larger boat with more complex systems. My brother bought the boat, and Hannah purchased a share of it and moved aboard.

Hannah is smart, fun, and game for just about anything. She's also great company, so we asked her to take us up the Hudson. She liked the idea of having her marine-journalist uncle and merchant mariner aunt along. It would allow her to spread her wings while still having some experienced able bodies aboard.

Neither my wife, Jeanne-Marie, nor I was interested in being in charge. My wife is a Kings Point grad and has all the credentials to function as captain, but both of us were happy to stare at the trees and have someone else be responsible for the vessel and its souls. We preferred to be mates, deck hands, galley slaves or passengers and were willing to pay for all the food, booze, fuel and dock fees to garner that privilege.

Our research showed the leaves would peak in late October, but because of scheduling conflicts we homed in on



Opening spread: Hannah guides *Consensus* under the Bear Mountain Bridge. Top left: Docked in Marlboro, New York Above: Kicking back at 8 knots

This page: Consensus enters the Hudson Highlands on her southbound return.



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We'll have to make a decision about going for Marlboro when we get to Croton-on-Hudson, just 32 miles from Jersey City. It's the last town with a marina capable of handling our 50-foot LOA before we reach Newburgh, 20 miles beyond Croton-on-Hudson.

My wife serves us a lovely breakfast in the pilothouse. Hannah eats at the helm with her feet up on the dash. The autopilot holds our course while she keeps an eye out for traffic and updates the log. My brother, a marine surveyor who investigates accidents at sea, would be proud. The logbook belonged to our grandfather, a merchant mariner, who used it on the retirement boat our father built for him 70 years ago.

By 0830, Grant's Tomb, the George Washington Bridge and Manhattan are behind us and we have the river to ourselves. To the west, the basalt cliffs of the New Jersey Palisades loom high above the river. It's difficult to believe that less than 15,000 years ago the Hudson flowed west of those cliffs on its way to Raritan Bay. It took a melting glacier to carve open the Narrows between Staten Island and Long Island where the Hudson now escapes into the Atlantic. That may have happened as little as 6,000 years ago.

Our speed over the ground remains above 8 knots, and Hannah and I obsessively recalculate our ETA to see if we can reach Marlboro before day's end. At 1000, at 7.4 knots, we pass beneath the new Governor Mario M. Cuomo Bridge. Its predecessor, the Tappan Zee Bridge, was recently blown up, and barge crews are still demolishing the wreckage.

Still doing 7.3 knots, we get to Croton before 1100. Even if the tide were to reduce our progress to just 5 knots, we'd still cover the 28 miles to Marlboro in less than six hours. We decide to go for it.

At the Hudson Highlands the river dramatically narrows, and we encounter our first commercial traffic. The AIS shows a

northbound tug-and-barge combo doing 5.5 knots. We've slowly been gaining on it, but on the GPS we can see that we won't catch it until the curvy part of the river at Jones Point.

The tug is pushing 13 barges, two abreast, and she's long. Hannah wants to pass, but my wife, a maritime attorney who drove tugs and barges in the Gulf of Alaska, preaches patience and caution. We hail the tug, *Buchanan*, on the VHF, give our top speed and ask if we can pass. The captain asks us to sit back so he can complete two sharp turns and get under the Bear Mountain Bridge where there will be a straightaway. We reduce power and follow him through the turns.

Under the Bear Mountain Bridge, the *Buchanan* tells us we can pass on two whistles. We bring our rpms up to 1,900—the maximum we're willing to ask of the Lehman— and start what will be the slowest passing of my life. Fortunately, there is no southbound traffic as we crawl past the tug and the first three barges. By the time we've consumed half the length of the straightaway, we still have four barges to go and I worry we're going to run out of room.

I'm tempted to ask the *Buchanan's* captain to slow down, but the AIS shows no traffic coming down the river, and I'm pretty sure the tug captain is not interested in giving up any steerage. If an AIS-less boat suddenly appears from the turn and bears down on us, three will *definitely* be a crowd. I generally love to boat slowly. It allows one to take in the sights and relax, but not now. I'm wishing *Consensus* had twin engines, were an MJM 53Z or had warp speed.

At last, we pass the final barge. We give ourselves a little extra space and slip in front of the combo 100 feet or so before the captain has to initiate his next turn. If the Lehman quits on us now, the steel barges will run us over and grind *Consensus's* fiberglass hull into tiny shards. I think of an acquaintance whose wooden schooner was splintered by a tug and barge in the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal. He and his daughter lived to tell the tale, but it's a discomfiting thought.

After putting some water between us and the barges, we enjoy the spectacular scenery. Arguably, this is the most dramatic part of the river. The sun has come out and the colors in the leaves are beginning to show. It's easy to see how it inspired 19th-century artists to form the Hudson River School of landscape painting.



Left: Hannah makes an engine room check; Jeanne-Marie enjoys the ride on the fantail.



The steep, granite and gneiss mountains come right up to the river. It looks like a small Norwegian fjord and it is a fjord. Fjords are by definition valleys eroded by glaciers and filled by the sea. In geological terms, the Hudson Fjord is a recent development, having been carved by the Wisconsin Glaciation somewhere between 13,000 and 26,000 years ago. At 200 feet, the Hudson River's deepest point is right below us near West Point.

During the Revolutionary War, West Point was considered to be the most important strategic position in America. General George Washington had a fortress constructed and a chain spread across the river to block British movement. The British never took the fort, and West Point is the

oldest continuously occupied military post in America. Now home to the United States Military Academy, it still looks mighty.

A few miles up from West Point, we motor past the red-brick carapace of Bannerman Castle on Pollepel island, which in the early 1900s housed military surplus from the Spanish-American War. The castle's remnants make the Hudson look like Germany's Rhine. We exit the Hudson Highlands, the river widens again, and the granite mountain landscape gives way to less dramatic sedimentary rock.

We pass Newburgh and at 1400 cross beneath the I-84 bridge. By 1500, the owner of the West Shore Marina in Marlboro helps us tie up to the outer dock. We pick his brain

about the local restaurant scene and get a humorous history of the hamlet, including a snarky reference to its most famous citizen, Nicole Elizabeth LaValle, better known as Snooki from the MTV reality show *Jersey Shore*.

After some rest, we climb the steep road to the town and locate the Raccoon Saloon—named for the creatures who were fed inside the hotel's bar in the 1940s. The restaurant is mobbed with diners, but the owner gives us a spot on the outdoor veranda where we enjoy a drink and a view of the Hudson. Our waitress, the owner's daughter, fills us in on the town and her “annoying” brother, the bus boy, until her mother calls her away for work. We're bummed. She was excellent entertainment.

We check out one other nearby restaurant but return to the Raccoon Saloon. The owner seats us by a window where we enjoy our meal and a rainbow as the sun sets on the Hudson.

Sated, we decide we can't leave town without sampling The Falcon, a live music venue, bar and restaurant in a former button factory perched over the Marlboro Falls. It is a rural mecca for live music, praised by *The New York Times* for providing “an intimate stage for top-tier musicians.” We buy a drink in the upstairs bar, then check out the Avalon Archives Museum of Rock & Roll in the basement. Museum founder and director Ned Moran is hanging out near the big display case and shows Hannah one of the more prized items, the Lifetime Achievement Grammy given to The Band's late bassist, Rick Danko, and donated to the museum by Danko's wife. We listen to a few live songs at the downstairs stage then walk down the dark hill and retire for the night.

The next morning, nature is right on our doorstep as two bald eagles perch atop the dock pilings. Instead of continuing upriver, we decide to slowly meander back towards Jersey City and do some hiking.

Soon after departure, I notice that *Consensus's* exhaust is smokier than the day before. The engine is in its normal operating range at 165 degrees Fahrenheit and 70 psi, but the exhaust is noticeably white and thick. We suspect water in the fuel and debate if we should switch to the other fuel filter.

Hannah goes into the engine room, sees no evidence of water in the filter, and because



neither of us thinks it's wise to switch filters in the middle of the river, decide to keep an eye on the gauges. She fires off a text to my brother in Australia for some marine engineering insight, and while we wait for a response, we continue downriver.

The weather is lovely: sun with high clouds, temps in the high 60s and an 11-knot headwind. At West Point we see that the engine temperature has risen to 170 degrees. I take the wheel and Hannah dives back into the engine room to take cylinder head temperatures, which seem fine.

We're not overly concerned, but the smoky exhaust is definitely on our minds. Regardless, it's hard not to enjoy the ride.

Overnight, it seems the colors have become more saturated. Long, colorful cargo, Metro North and Amtrak trains have been a constant presence along both sides of the river. When we cross beneath the steel trusses of the Bear Mountain bridge it feels like we're part of a miniature train set.

Boat traffic is heavy, and we're taken aback when a northbound Circle Line sightseeing boat suddenly leaves the eastside of the river and turns directly toward us. When we call the tour boat on the VHF radio the captain curtly tells us he's going to the Bear Mountain dock on the west side of the river. Pulling a huge wake, he crosses us and puts

Consensus's round hull into a wicked roll. Inside our pilothouse we agree that a courtesy call from the boat—or passing behind us—would have been a lovely gesture.

We exit the Highlands and in a dead calm cruise down Haverstraw Bay. At 3.5 miles across, this is the widest part of the Hudson River. We wend our way between becalmed sailboats, and by 1400 we pull up at Half Moon Bay Marina in Croton-on-Hudson.

Rather than taking a taxi ride to Bear Mountain for our hike, the marina manager suggests we walk to Croton Point Park. The 508-acre county peninsula park juts into the Tappan Zee segment of the Hudson River, and for the next three hours we walk its perimeter, checking out the wildlife, the people, the river and the distant views of Manhattan.

Back at the marina, perched atop *Consensus's* pilothouse, we enjoy a cocktail and watch the sun set between the clouds. We stroll to the waterfront restaurants, fail to get a table and call an Uber. We eat in an Italian eatery that disappoints, but it's been another great day on the Hudson.

The next morning, before we cast off, Hannah switches over to the other fuel filter, but underway the engine continues to send out smoke signals. My wife searches the internet for causes, and Hannah ducks

back into the engine room for more cylinder head temperature readings. Right in front of my eyes, I watch the engine temperature gauge rise to 190 degrees in mere seconds. I reduce power, which stunts the rise, and we weigh our options. In case we have to drop the hook, I steer us to shallower waters. Then, just as suddenly as it went up, the gauge drops right down to 165 degrees. We stick our heads out of the pilothouse and the smoke is gone. All is well.

We're stymied, but also relieved. We debate whether it was the fuel filter or something else, but more importantly, go back to enjoying the ride. We pass beneath the Palisades' cliffs and arrive back at Liberty Landing Marina, where Hannah slides *Consensus* into her slip as if she's docked 50-footers her entire life.

Hot engines, long tug-and-barge combos and unpredictable tour boats have not dampened our enthusiasm for the Hudson River. We're euphoric about the trip, sad that it's over and can't wait to do it again.

About all of that, there is nothing but consensus. ⑨

Above: In the fall, the Lower Hudson River delivers splendor and quiet.