

We fetched the best
timbers with the peapod.

A Perfect Day On The Coast Of Maine



Every once in a while, a cruising family sails into an exquisite moment in the life of a boat and its people. When our two children were young, we sailed hundreds of days and thousands of miles together in northern New England — with islands and anchorages and adventures galore. Yet in the ledger of “perfect family days on the boat,” none of them topped the sparkling summer day the boy built his raft.

That particular August morning was still, in a way special to the coast of Maine, when abundant sunshine warms arms and legs normally layered in clothes. Every color outdid itself: crisp white clouds, clear blue sky, emerald green trees. Lobster pot buoys glistened, immobilized on a placid sea. The awe-inspiring coast had traded its often-daunting moods for a laid-back one.

After breakfast, we hauled the anchor and motored south-southwest, hoping the breeze would fill in. Pointed firs slipped past along with weathered fish shacks, shingled summer houses and that memorable rocky intertidal zone, draped in kelp and bladder wrack. I craved a breeze, but as the hours ticked by, my weather sense told me there was no wind in the offing. Skipper and crew were restless.

The place ahead on the starboard bow certainly wasn't a harbor, just an indentation in an eastward-facing shoreline. I could tell that the rugged shore had felt the full fury of numerous nor'easters. It had no sand, just cobbles, with lots of flotsam and jetsam. We had never paused here, but with no sailing in the offing, an unplanned stop on a deserted island seemed like just the ticket.

The anchor was barely down before the boy begged to go ashore. “Mom’s gonna make lunch. I’ll just go check out the beach.”

He was already untying the peapod’s painter, looking imploringly. “OK,” I said. “Make sure you pull the boat up far enough. And stay in sight.”

Off like a shot, he rowed for the shore, confidently and tracking true. I watched as he landed, stowed the oars and secured the boat to a rock. Then, like a hound dog ranging for scent, he began to traverse the beach, eyes down, alert for treasure.

The best beachcombers have keen sight and a collector’s gene. They don’t wander. They don’t contemplate. They hunt. Over the years, our kids had found sea glass, shells, sand dollars, bait bags, feathers, bones, pot warp, balls, boat parts, weathered driftwood, bottles (with and without mes-

The Boy & His Raft



Carl makes engineering refinements at the construction site.



The launch went off without a hitch.

sages) and pot buoys — many pot buoys. Ellie, our daughter, enjoyed walking shorelines and encountering curiosities. Her younger brother, Carl, on the other hand, collected with a vengeance. He stowed manageable treasures (at least those passing the “smell test”) in his bunk, while big ones, such as pot buoys, went into the lazarette for the duration of the cruise. Later, he would add them to his extensive buoy collection piled in a corner of the barn at home.

Eleven-year-old boys don’t always share their parents’ enthusiasms. My wife, Molly, and I had been of one mind about cruising Down East since before we met. To our way of thinking, coastal Maine was beautiful, a moving seascape that connected us to nature, even as its built environment (cozy houses and granite wharves constructed by self-reliant islanders in another age) anchored us in time. Maine had more wildness per coastal mile than any other Atlantic state, and sufficient challenges to keep every navigator on his or her toes. What wasn’t to like? Our long-ago courtship involved dreams of having the perfect boat to sail that perfect coast, perhaps with kids in tow. Boating friends from elsewhere insisted Maine’s water was too cold, its fog too thick, its ledges unforgiving. They just didn’t get it.

When Carl was 5 we bought a classic 36-foot wooden yawl. Designed by K. Aage Nielsen and built by Paul E. Luke at East Boothbay in 1961, *Magic* was among the last generation of wooden boats constructed before fiberglass revolutionized recreational boating. Her sweeping sheer and counter stern were exquisite. Every detail seduced us, from the varnished ash tiller to the cast bronze hardware. Modern creature comforts, admittedly, were in short supply. Her charms more than compensated. She smelled right, felt right, looked right. She had acres of varnish and an unreliable Atomic 4 gas engine. She needed refastening below the waterline and lots of TLC. Yet with authentic connections to the past and drop-dead good looks, she was exactly what we wanted.

The kids did not get a vote on that life-changing purchase. They might have opted for Disney World, or staying home with friends to watch movies or play soccer. So we shanghaied them. Adventures awaited.

The junior deckhand, our redheaded son, was (like most redheads) sensitive, passionate, emotional — and notoriously headstrong. He generally didn’t fancy himself a sailor, much less appreciate being kidnapped for the summer, though he developed a knack for beachcombing. Curious and impetuous, a born leader among his peers and an athlete who could do anything with a ball, he often thought himself a fish out of water on that lovely old yawl. It was just too confining. The historic coast’s storied past did not sing to him, and the long cruises about which his mother and father fantasized were not the stuff of his dreams.

Cruising always requires concessions. Among enthusiastic crew, such concessions are no big deal. Reluctant crew, however, see them differently. Our redheaded deckhand could be a team player, but with energy to burn, he needed to get off the boat frequently. And his opinions mattered. They affected each day more than the barometer on the cabin bulkhead. *Magic’s* mandatory stores included baseball gloves, bats, baseballs, a basketball and a skateboard. My wife and I had bought the boat for secluded anchorages, an annual pilgrimage to Roque Island and serendipitous encounters afloat. Yet our cruise tracks ultimately included every woebegone ballpark and asphalt basketball court on the coast.



He paddled triumphantly all afternoon.

“Hey, you guys, there’s a lot of cool stuff on the beach. I want to make a raft.” Carl had returned for lunch and could barely sit still long enough to eat, alternating bites with descriptions of the island and its booty. Rope, Styrofoam and timbers: He had found it all, essentially a raft-in-a-kit, spread along the shore. And pot buoys, good ones. We would have to come see. He had a plan.

Lugging timbers across a rocky beach is a good formula for twisted ankles, so we fetched the best ones with the peapod and towed them to the construction site.

As Carl headed off to collect castaway rope, his sister meandered down the shore. I helped him carry the Styrofoam, light but awkward, and loaned him my knife. The sparkle in his face revealed vision. I kept my bosun’s suggestions about square lashing and proper knots to myself. He would sort it out.

“Ellie, look at this. Mom, come here!” He had gotten through the false starts and failed knots, and after minor re-engineering, his homespun raft rested at the edge of the tide. Would it swim? We gathered around and mustered all the fanfare possible without a proper champagne christening. Fortunately, the launch went beautifully. Paul E. Luke’s gang could not have done it better.

He paddled triumphantly around that nameless cove all afternoon. Since Huck Finn and Jim floated down the Mississippi River long ago, every American kid has known that life on a raft is easy and free. Here was proof. Just as good, the volatile, hard-throwing ballplayer and skateboarder, born into a family of mariners, had refashioned himself into a mariner. He was proud and pleased. So were we. Some junk on the beach and a boy’s spunk had redeemed a day without wind and recast the cruise.

That’s cruising — higher highs and lower lows, and always-surprising revelations. You buy a boat. You dream. You plan and prepare. You assemble a crew, shanghaied or not. Then you depart. Count on the unexpected, because it is always part of the bargain. If you are lucky, that unexpected will charm or move you. That’s what happened to us on the sparkling summer day the boy built his raft. ■