

**R**egardless of whether or not you have a formal “bucket list” of experiences you want to check off before you check out, every one of us has a few things we really want to do in this life. For adventure-minded boaters, it could be rounding Cape Horn or heading up the West Coast Inside Passage all the way to Alaska, or island-hopping down to the Caribbean. But time waits for no one, so the practical skipper and crew focus on what is doable sooner versus later.

The Great Loop, the 6,000-mile system of natural and man-made waterways that encompasses the eastern portion of the United States and part of Canada, has that same allure, but without the somewhat intimidating bluewater miles. The reality, though, is this epic voyage in the slow lane also takes at least six months, and more likely a year to complete – too long for most working people be away from their jobs. Yes, plenty of boaters peck away at The Loop, cruising sections over the space of years, but it’s still a large and lengthy commitment.

For adventurers more tethered to home and work obligations, there are more modest and manageable options generally referred to as “mini loops,” which include sections of the Great Loop. You get a nice

# The allure of the






scenic cruise and lifetime memory while ending up back where you started in time to return to “real life.” Depending on where you live on the East Coast, there’s a mini loop nearby.

### **Which mini-loop is right for you?**

“The mini loops are a good way to practice for the Great Loop and to confirm that everything on your boat is working,” says Phil Barbalace of Tysons, Virginia. The Barbalaces have done the “Carolina Loop,” which meanders 150 miles among wildlife, friendly small towns, locks, and bridges through Dismal Swamp, the Pasquotank River, Albemarle and Currituck sounds, to Chesapeake, Virginia; and the “Florida Loop,” which circumnavigates the lower third of Florida from Fort Meyers, east through the Caloosahatchee River, Lake Okeechobee, St. Lucie Canal and river, south along the east coast through the Keys, then north back to Fort Meyers.

“This can vary, depending on your pace, but the 550-mile Florida Loop would probably take about two weeks; the Carolina Loop might only take a long weekend,” says Kimberly Russo, director of the America’s

# ‘MINI LOOP’



Tackling the epic Great Loop is a big commitment. Maybe too big right now? Wait, there are bite-sized versions up and down the East Coast



Great Loop Cruisers' Association (AGLCA, [greatloop.org](http://greatloop.org)), which serves as a central source of information and communication about the Great Loop and boasts 3,500 members.

Popular mini loops to the north include the 700-mile Triangle Loop, north through the Hudson River, Lake Champlain, Richelieu Canal (toward Montreal), southwest along the St. Lawrence River or Rideau Canal, Lake Ontario, then east on the Oswego and Erie canals back to the Hudson. The route meanders through centuries-old Canadian canals with hand cranks opening the locks, the scenic Thousand Islands, and a chance to experience the European flair of Old Montreal.

"The Triangle would likely take several weeks," says Russo.

The Down East Loop runs 2,700 miles north on the Hudson River, Lake Champlain, Richelieu River, east on the St. Lawrence River, the east coast of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and New England, and Long Island Sound to New York and back to the Hudson. The diversity from the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York to locking through the St. Lawrence to the towering New York skyline make for a full experience.

"From a technical boating perspective, the Down East Loop is more demanding than the other loops because you have to navigate some ocean off Maine, and the weather and tides can make it challenging. Most people consider it doable in a single summer season."

In prepping for the Down East Loop, seasoned skippers stress being comfortable running with radar, chartplotter, and a send/receive AIS, as you're likely to run into some fog coming around Nova Scotia.

Some Loopers say they come away from the experience with a new perspective on our nation's river systems as the interstates of old. All agree this is not a race but rather a journey.

1. Carolina Loop
2. Triangle Loop
3. Florida Loop
4. Down East Loop



## THE CAROLINA LOOP

### 'A sense of adventure'

Phil and Karen Barbalace of Tysons, Virginia, own a Mainship 40 Expedition named *Seascope*. Phil's a semi-retired professional photographer; Karen was a stay-at-home mom. But now they're empty nesters with two sons out of college, one married.

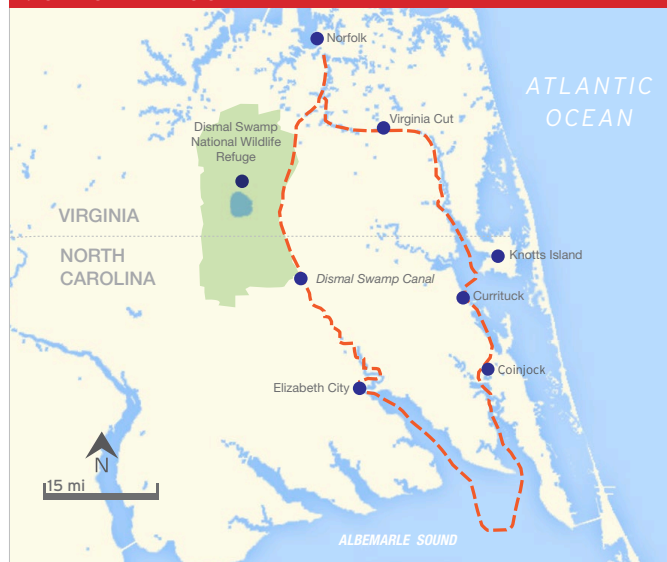
"I started crewing and ocean sailing 10 years ago helping to deliver sailboats from Chesapeake Bay to the BVI and back in the Caribbean 1500 rallies. Karen didn't want to do ocean sailing, so we discovered the Great Loop several years ago, which is mostly on inland waterways without the hazards and discomfort of ocean sailing," Phil says.

The Carolina Loop is well-marked and requires transiting only three locks

**Below: Phil and Karen Barbalace of Virginia have experienced both the Florida and Carolina Loops. They say that these "mini loops" are great practice cruises in preparation for the Great Loop.**



### 1. CAROLINA LOOP



and bridges. Cruisers come away saying the Dismal Swamp Canal is a 22-mile stretch that shouldn't be missed. Most cruisers accomplish the loop in three or four days, some take longer, Phil says, "but we did it in a smaller and faster boat in two days. It's shorter and less complicated than the Florida Loop."

The couple echoes the advice of so many veteran Loopers: "Take your time, watch the weather and enjoy the sights. Spend time in the towns along the way," Phil says. "Don't try to make too much distance in one day, and don't have a schedule where you have to be somewhere by a certain time."

"The feelings at the end of a mini-loop journey provide a sense of adventure, discovering new places and a sense of satisfaction that you've accomplished a challenging goal," he says. "I also found it to be rewarding as a true test of piloting skills all around."



**Left: A boat enters the Great Bridge Lock. Right: Bill and Cheryll Odendahl appreciate the logistical convenience of being able to start and end in the same location so they can spend the time they want on the water before trailering their boat home to Michigan.**

## 2. TRIANGLE LOOP



## THE TRIANGLE LOOP

### Go with the flow

**B**ill and Cheryll Odendahl of Michigan are both retired from the engineering department at General Motors. They cruise extensively and have lived aboard their trailerable 25-foot Ranger Tug, *Roam*. The couple has completed both the Florida Loop and the Triangle Loop.

"Cheryll and I spend our winters aboard *Roam* in Florida. We feel that the Ranger Tugs R-25 is a great blend between livability and trailerability," says Bill. "We spend three to four months aboard and then trailer the boat back to our condo in Michigan in two or three days. And most importantly," he adds with a smile, "our relationship is strong enough that we're still talking to each other."

They found inspiration to do the Triangle Loop from a chapter in the *Waterway Guide* cruising and boater guide. "I had heard great things about the Rideau Canal, but the chapter made it clear that this could easily be a loop," he says. "Even with a trailerable boat, starting and ending in the same place makes logistics much easier."

For each of the trips, Bill created a spreadsheet with rough ideas of how far they wanted to go each day. This was just for planning purposes, and they planned short days.

"We wanted the flexibility to stay in port when it was too rough or we wanted more time to explore," he says. "The locks are very unpredictable. Most locks only take 10 to 20 minutes to transit, but a few required waits of several hours. Some days had to end wherever we were when closing time came for the locks."

The Triangle Loop took them 28 days, including a side trip to the Thousand Islands area, and they tallied expenses of \$659 for dockage and \$393 for 142 gallons of diesel.

"Be flexible with your schedule, and don't push it with the weather. The lake will calm down if you're patient," is Bill's advice. "We spent two unplanned days in Tobermory, Ontario, waiting for the weather and had a fabulous time exploring the national park and town."





**FUN FACT** A perk of completing the Great Loop is a special AGLCA burgee from the association, and cruisers fly it proudly. To commend cruisers who tackle the more demanding Down East Loop, the group recently brought back the special burgee for accomplishing that mini loop.



**Above and right:** Janice Nagle and Steve Russell traded in their sailboat for a trawler to do the Great Loop. The couple used the Florida Loop as a shakedown cruise and stretched out the experience.

## THE FLORIDA LOOP

### Love is not enough

Janice Nagle and Steve Russell have lived on both coasts and, according to Janice, “have been nomads for the past 10 years.” They own a 32-foot Island Gypsy appropriately named *Nomadic Spirit*. Steve is retired from management in the brewing industry. Janice has an IT background, finishing her career on the sales end of telecommunications. “I was a victim of downsizing at just the right time. I joke that Steve retired early and I just quit working,” she says.

The couple completed the Florida Loop last year. They are new to trawlers but spent six years sailing the Caribbean, so they consider themselves experienced boaters.

“Steve had learned about the Great Loop while researching for cruising sailboats. Almost immediately we knew that once we finished cruising we would exchange the sailboat for a trawler for that purpose. The Florida Loop was the perfect shakedown for our much larger Great Loop,” she says. “While one could do that distance in a week, we stretched it into three months.

As they prepare to tackle the Great Loop, Janice says they are regularly asked for advice from others considering taking such a trip. “I always say love is not enough. You have to really, really like each other to spend so much time so

closely together,” she says.

They suggest couples spend time on cruising forums asking questions as there is a wealth of firsthand information from people happy to help others. They also urge cruisers to familiarize themselves with all the systems on their boat, from mechanics to navigation.

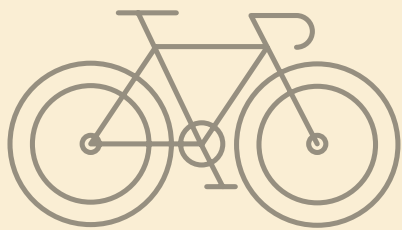
“Being totally free to go where you wanted, when you wanted, was exhilarating, as was exploring new places and people. It is a simple, inexpensive life if you live on the hook, which we prefer over crowded marinas,” Janice says.

**IT IS A SIMPLE, INEXPENSIVE LIFE IF YOU LIVE ON THE HOOK, WHICH WE PREFER OVER CROWDED MARINAS**



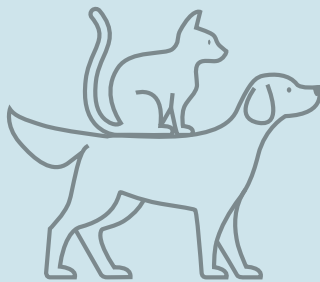
See Government Affairs on page 46 for an update on Florida's algae blooms.

## Provisioning priorities



### Should I bring a bicycle?

Some say if you don't use a bike at home, you won't use it while cruising. On the other hand, you'll be arriving at port without motorized road transportation, and bikes can be an efficient way to get to stores, restaurants, and sites. Some, but not all, marinas have courtesy cars you can borrow to get around town.



### Can I bring my pet?

Dogs, cats, and even sometimes birds are frequent Looping companions. Be sure to carry copies of your pet's vaccination records, and make sure you have the documentation you need to cross international borders.



### Do I need to bring enough supplies to last for the entire trip?

You'll have no trouble provisioning just about anywhere on the route. Even the small towns along the way have grocery stores and often big chains like Walmart. More recently, AGLCA members have been recommending Amazon Prime as an efficient way to get supplies. Most marinas will accept packages for you, and with Amazon Prime's two-day shipping, it's easier to know where you'll be to receive the package. — **AGLCA**



### FUN FACT

About 300 boats are in progress around the Great Loop at any given time, according to AGLCA. More than 100 complete the loop annually.



## Loop and mini loop FAQ

### What air draft (height) restrictions are there?

Depending on your route, long before you depart, be sure to check fixed bridge clearance throughout the route. Some with taller boats are able to get under 15- or 20-foot bridges by lowering antennas and radar arches. About 8% of AGLCA members have sailboats, and most of them need to unstep the mast to clear the bridges outside of Chicago and upstate New York. If you can clear a 15-foot bridge, you have the option to take the Erie Canal to its western terminus into Lake Erie. If you can clear a 17-foot bridge, you can do the Triangle Loop that takes you into Lake Champlain and through the St. Lawrence Seaway into Lake Ontario. If the lowest you can clear is 19-foot, you'll take the Erie Canal to the Oswego Canal into Lake Ontario.

### What is the maximum water draft for a boat doing the Great Loop?

It is recommended that your boat for a loop not have a depth much greater than 5 feet.

### What fuel range does my boat need to have?

The farthest distance without a fuel stop along the Great Loop route is between Alton, Illinois, on the Upper Mississippi River, and Paducah, Kentucky – about 250 miles. Some Loopers whose boats don't have the necessary range carry additional fuel in cans, drums, or bladders on the deck for this section. – AGLCA



## THE DOWN EAST LOOP

### Just do it

Roger VanHoozer is a retired manufacturing executive and consultant. He and his wife, Christine, have owned powercruising boats, both larger (a 47-foot Bayliner and 55-foot Vantare) and smaller (a 28-foot Stamos). They've been dayboaters on a Seattle lake and Catalina Island cruisers in Southern California. A consulting job brought them to Missouri, near Table Rock Lake, where they bought a houseboat and lived aboard for three years before selling it to buy their current boat, a 5288 Bayliner, *Miss Utah*, in Charleston, South Carolina, from where their looping began, and aboard which they now live. They've since completed the Florida, Triangle, and Down East Loops.

**Above and opposite:** The Down East Loop is the most challenging of the four mini loops, though Roger and Christine VanHoozer say that good preparation left them feeling confident aboard *Miss Utah*.

### 4. DOWN EAST LOOP





“It was at our dock on Table Rock Lake that a friend mentioned the Great Loop, which we had never heard of before,” Roger says. “It sounded interesting so we investigated it, joined the AGLCA, went to work on getting fully retired, sold the houseboat, and went boat shopping for a Looper boat. I’ve always been a ‘sounds like a neat adventure, let’s go for it’ type of guy, so the decision was quick.”

First up came the Down East Loop.

“One of us had read something about the Down East Loop before we bought our current boat, so we bought Cheryl Barr’s book, *The Down East Circle Route*, which provided all the information we needed other than some charts,” he says. “The only planning was really to be ready to enter the Champlain Canal by about mid-June to give us three months for the trip.”

With all of those previous cruising miles under their keel, Roger says they felt relaxed and confident on the Down East Loop.

“It was less challenging than we had expected. The only rough water we had was crossing the St. Lawrence bar, where it empties into the Atlantic. We had 6-foot seas for a couple hours but could have waited a day for calm seas,” he says.

They experienced several unexpected but welcome surprises, such as the whales at the entrance to Saguenay Fjord, then an incredible whale show in the Gaspé Peninsula, just south of where the St. Lawrence meets the Atlantic Ocean, where they shut the engines off and the whales surrounded their boat for a couple hours.

#### **FUN FACT**

Although the Great Loop has been done in both directions, it’s usually done counterclockwise so that you are going with the current, not against it, on the inland rivers.