

# The life of the live-aboard

BY GLENN MILLER

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"... Friday night was the traditional gathering time for the live-aboards and marina employees. It was the brief quiet time before the weekend rush, when they came together as a community. When they drank and laughed and complained and lied, with no one around to hear, just them, and the marina became a private thing, like a secret."

"The Heat Islands," by Randy Wayne White

In Randy Wayne White's popular series of thrillers, a marine biologist named Doc Ford lives at a fictional marina on fictional Dinkin's Bay on the real Sanibel Island. Many of his neighbors are live-aboards, folks who reside on boats.

Doc Ford is more than a marine biologist. He's also a secret agent who sometimes kills bad guys who need killing. All in a day's work, of course. At the end of the day he often hangs out with his neighbors at Dinkin's Bay, reveling in their friendship.

The live-aboard lifestyle sounds seductive.

"Sometimes people think living on a boat is all martinis and drinks," said Joe Moran, who resides with his wife, Connie, on a 36-footer named "Chesapeake" that is moored at the Fort Myers Yacht Basin. "It's very much like owning a home. There's something to be done on it every day."

Bob Wise and his wife, Kathy, reside on a 55-foot Novatec Islander called the "Sea Wise." The boat is moored in Punta Gorda. But they can change their address quite simply.

"If you'd like a change of scenery untie your lines," Mr. Wise said.

Real life live-aboards such as the Wises and Mr. Moran reside on boats sprinkled all through Southwest Florida, up and down the coast, snugly hidden away between islands or moored at marinas on bayous or in the heart of bustling downtown Fort Myers, mere steps away from vibrant nightlife. The boats are anchored or moored on bays and inlets and rivers and even the Gulf of Mexico.

It's unlikely you'll find a secret agent just returned from killing terrorists at any of them. Live-aboards say it doesn't matter what one did before joining the community of live-aboards. Well, unless that something involved being a terrorist.

Russ and Janice Pouliot, who will celebrate their 47th anniversary in October, live on a 36-foot boat called "Dream Chaser" that is docked at the Fort Myers Yacht Basin, which is nestled downtown between the Caloosahatchee and Edison bridges. The retirees from New Hampshire don't have a house to go back to in the Granite State.

"We're not homeless," Mr. Pouliot, 71, pointed out. "Just houseless."

Ms. Pouliot said they don't miss owning a home, particularly in New Hampshire.

"No!" Ms. Pouliot, 66, said. "And worry about snow load?"

That's not a worry at their home on the Caloosahatchee.

A recent winter morning, when the temperature dipped into the 30s, didn't faze the Poilets.

"You don't shovel that," Mr. Pouliot said of the nippy weather.

This is the life for these retirees.

"Your winter last three days," Mr. Pouliot said of Floridians.

Quite a contrast to New Hampshire.



Kalisik family - Kim, Randy and 13-year-old Corey.

COURTESY PHOTOS

"Our summer lasts three days," Ms. Pouliot said.

The boat is their home. Other live-aboards are their neighbors, some of whom may also have houses in distant states. What matters most, the Pouliots have learned, is not the status of a neighbor's land-based residence or occupations, either current or previous.

"One thing that really surprised me was no one asks what you did," Ms. Pouliot said. "No one cares if you were a lawyer or a maintenance man. It isn't a topic of discussion. We're all retired." Live-aboards revel in the camaraderie of their communities.

Kim and Randy Kalisik and their 13-year-old son, Corey, have lived for nearly six years on a 40-foot DeFever Passage Maker at Salty Sam's Marina on Fort Myers Beach. Their trawler is named "Blue Turtle."

"It's opened up so many opportunities," Ms. Kalisik said of the nautical lifestyle.

For starters they don't always need a car.

"We take the dinghy to restaurants," Ms. Kalisik said.

Ms. Kalisik has embraced the nautical lifestyle so profoundly that she blogs about it at blueturtletrawler.com. It might sometimes seem to land-locked folks that live-aboards are not merely leaving the 21st century behind but also the 20th. That's not the case, as Ms. Kalisik points out under the FAQ portion of her blog.

"Many folks think we are moored out in the middle of nowhere, however, that is not the case," she wrote.

Live-aboards have access to the amenities expected in houses, condos and apartments.

"Our electric is metered through the marina and we have water, cable and WIFI access as part of the slip package," Ms. Kalisik wrote on her blog.

Ms. Kalisik said she and her family have discovered a greater sense of community in their marina than in the Lee County neighborhood where they once resided.

"It just seems we lead a more active lifestyle," Ms. Kalisik said.

The lifestyle is downright addictive to many live-aboards.

Janice Pouliot joked about the "Dream Chaser" being moored at a "Velcro dock."

"Once we get in we can't leave," she said one recent morning standing at that "Velcro dock" next to the "Dream Chaser."

What does one need to become a live-aboard?

The Pouliots talked about the "will" to do it and how both partners in a marriage or any relationship need to embrace the lifestyle.

From the downtown yacht basin live-aboards such as the Pouliots see many people strolling by along Edwards Drive. And some passersby wonder about living on a boat.

"We say you don't need to go by," Ms. Pouliot said. "Come by and have a drink with us. A lot of people have questions about the boat life. They think you need a lot of money. You don't need a lot of money to live on a boat."

Janice said she is often asked what they do all day on the boat.

"It's like what do you do all day at home," she said. "It's the same thing. We have to do dishes and cook meals, clean the windows, clean the outside."

Mr. Pouliot pointed out one critical difference.

"I don't have to mow the lawn," he said.

Well, there is that.

The live-aboards at the downtown Fort Myers Yacht Basin have plenty available within walking distance. There is the downtown library and the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center, Centennial Park and Harborside Event Center. And more...

"You have the art show," said Mr. Moran. "You're going to have a film festival. You're going to have a book festival."

And then it's a short walk back to the marina and home aboard the "Chesapeake."

"It was Friday night, clean-up and cocktail time. ... Live-aboards were beginning to circulate among neighboring houseboats, drinks in hand, smiles fixed, everybody smelling of shampoo and looking for a party. Somebody had put speakers out on the dock so that Jimmy Buffett seemed to be erupting from the water singing. ..."

"Sanibel Flats," by Randy Wayne White

After the work is done. After the dishes are washed and the deck scrubbed, and the grocery shopping is completed and all the countless details that go into caring for a boat have been taken care of for that particular day, live-aboards can kick back.

"Definitely here a traditional thing that happens at 5 o'clock is docktails," Mr. Moran said. "A get-together. You'll have six, eight, 10 boats. People just come up and have a glass of wine or cocktail and you get to know your neighbors."

That's not just in the fictional world of Dinkin's Bay.

That's also in the world of real live-aboards, sprinkled through Southwest Florida. ■