

Trawler Talk

Cruising the Great Loop

Did you know that you can circumnavigate the eastern half of the United States by water? The route you would follow is an amazing connection of lakes, rivers, and canals that has been named The Great Loop. Most people that come to us to buy a trawler are seriously thinking about, planning for, or just plain dreaming about taking on this “adventure of a lifetime” as it is often called.

A typical cruising plan would be to follow the seasons so no matter where you start from you would spend the summer months in the Great Lakes, the fall cruising the river system from Chicago to the Gulf, winter in Florida or the Bahamas, and finally the east coast back to the Great Lakes in spring. Some will do this in one continuous trip living aboard their boat the entire time. Others will do it in segments, leaving their boat at some marina or storage facility and returning to their home to catch up on businesses, the holidays, the grandkids, or just to take a break. The best way to enjoy The Great Loop is to throw away the calendar and enjoy each day as it unfolds. Weather patterns, boat systems that need adjusting, lock delays, and family issues are all things beyond your control that will dictate where and when you will be at a certain point. There will also be times you’ll find yourself in a place that beckons you to linger for several more days to take it all in.

If you read our series of three articles published in the May, July, and August 2005 issues of Boats & Notes, we described our trip delivering the Lagoon Power Cat from Wisconsin to Florida. This actually covered half of the Loop but completed in a delivery mode rather than the typical leisurely pace and going south on the eastern route rather than north.

Many people want to know the length of the trip in miles, what kind of boat is best to use, and how much it will cost. As you can imagine, there are some great variables here.



First, it depends on the actual route you take with various options at different locations. There are two separate river/canal systems you can take from Chicago to the Illinois River. When you get to the Ohio River, you can either take it east to Kentucky Lake and then south on the Tenn-Tom Waterway to Mobile, Alabama or you can continue south on the Mississippi River to New Orleans. Crossing the Gulf can be one long day and into the night to get to Tarpon Springs, Florida, where you pick up the Intercoastal Waterway. Another choice would be to make this a two-day trip and stop off at Cedar Key for a relaxing evening. When you get to Fort Myers, you can cut across the state of Florida cruising across Lake Okeechobee to Stuart on the east coast or you can continue south all the way around the Keys before heading north. And as I mentioned earlier, many may take a side trip to the Bahamas or other islands during the winter months. Heading north on the Intercoastal Waterway, there may be some days you could run out in the Atlantic Ocean to avoid all the "slow no wake" areas on the ICW. Of course, you miss some of the beautiful and interesting scenery along the way. When you cruise north through New York on the Hudson River, you can choose to head east on the Erie Canal or continue north to Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence River in Canada for a much longer route bringing you back to the Great Lakes via the Trent Severn Waterway. This eliminates both Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. We also wrote about the Trent Severn Waterway in the October and January issues of Boats & Notes. Both of the stories are posted on our website under Events/Cruises.

So as you can see, there are a lot of choices to make and why it is smart to not put yourself on a tight time schedule. To put it in numbers though, most would say the average Great Loop cruise is 6000 miles.

What boat to use is really very subjective. Some will use whatever boat they currently have, some will buy a boat specifically for this trip and sell it when they're done, some have made the trip in more than one particular boat changing sizes along the way or from year to year. Yes, there are some who have gone around multiple times...it's that much fun!!! The trip has been done in small sailboats to very large houseboats or yachts, but there are some general rules of thumb to consider. Depth in some areas of the waterway would be a major challenge for boats that draft more than 6 feet. There are lots of bridges to go under, both car and railway, that are either opening (some at only designated times) or are fixed. For example, there is a section on the Erie Canal that has fixed bridges at 15' 6" height from the waterline. There are 54 bridges going through the city of Chicago alone and the trawlers we have had through there with bridge clearance of less than 12' have allowed us to go under each one without needing them opened for us. Having said all that, the average size of boat used is generally in the 32 to 42 foot range.

But there's more to it than just size and that's the design of the boat. Decisions need to be made regarding layout such as how many people it should sleep, cooking and food storage considerations, bridge or pilot house helm stations or both, space for electronic equipment, and especially outside deck areas. There will be a constant handling of lines and fenders going through the over 100 locks you will encounter on the Loop. Then you will be tying up somewhere for the night whether it's at a dock or an anchorage, so how easy it is to access the cleats and get on & off the boat are big issues that will impact you every day.

The cost of the trip is another big variable. Will you anchor out at night or take a slip at a marina? You'll pay by the foot at the marinas varying from 85 cents a foot in the Midwest to over \$4.00 a foot in New York City. Will you eat out in restaurants or cook on board? Some say the Great Loop is just one steady stream of restaurants to enjoy along the way. Will you rent a car in some locations to explore the area in greater depth? Of course, you need to remember that if you were at home during this time, you would be spending money on these items as well. If you rent out your house while you are gone or sell it or downsize you could save some money that way. If we just look at docking almost every night at a marina for an average cost of \$1.50 per foot for a 34 foot boat and 300 days would run just over \$15,000.

And probably the biggest question regarding cost is if your boat has a diesel or gas engine and how fast you will push it along. For instance, a 34' trawler like the American Tug, can cruise at 7 knots and burn 1.5 gallons per hour. At an average cost of diesel at \$3.00 per gallon and a little over 1000 gallons used the total cost would be \$3000.00 for fuel. In contrast, a twin-engine gas-powered boat of similar size able to cruise at 20 knots would consume over 8000 gallons of fuel and cost more than \$25,000.00. In fairness, there certainly would be times when a semi-displacement trawler would cruise at 13-14 knots to stabilize

the boat in rough seas, to get in before dark, or to beat a storm and it would then be burning more fuel.

There will be further costs associated with all the charts and guide books you will need for The Great Loop. Some cruisers may be lucky to buy a full set of used ones from those who have finished the loop, but buying them new will run in excess of \$2000.00. There's more and more information available on CD's and DVD's and most people will carry a laptop with them. Also, staying connected back home will cost some additional dollars in the areas of wireless service and antenna amplifiers for your cell phone.

As you can see, a lot of planning and forethought needs to be done to make an adventure like this successful and fun. We advise people to choose their boat at least a year in advance of departure and take several shorter trips. This gives them a chance to really learn their boat as far as operating all of the systems onboard and handling dockage and anchoring in many different situations. It will also help them learn how much equipment and supplies are actually needed and used while cruising to prevent overloading the boat.

Cruising the Great Loop has become increasingly popular and a lot of books and articles have been written by those who have experienced it. One couple in particular, Ron & Eva Stob, have written the book "Honey, Let's Get a Boat" and have toured the country giving talks about their experiences on the Great Loop. The interest and enthusiasm they found led to the organization of America's Great Loop Cruiser's Association (AGLCA) and the publishing of a bi-monthly newsletter called The Great Loop Link started in August, 1999. They also maintain a thorough and up-to-date Membership directory.

"America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association (AGLCA) is an association of boaters who have cruised or dream of cruising any or all of America's Great Loop." To learn more about the Great Loop, go to www.greatloop.com.

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