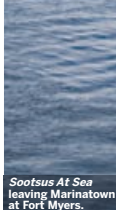


THE ROUTE



Florida-bound: Michael and Frances Howorth.



Sootsus At Sea leaving Marintown at Fort Myers.

THE BOAT



Sootsus At Sea at anchor in Hancock Creek with Nigel fishing and Sally and Michael watching.

<b>Model</b>	Mainship 43 Aft Cabin Crawler
<b>LOA</b>	47ft 9in (14.60m)
<b>Beam</b>	15ft 5in (4.75m)
<b>Draught:</b>	3ft 8in (1.16m)
<b>Air draught</b>	19ft 0in (5.60m)
<b>Displacement</b>	16.33 tonnes
<b>Accommodation</b>	Six berths in three cabins
<b>Fuel</b>	300 US gal (1,135 litres)
<b>Water</b>	250 US gal (946 litres)
<b>Engines</b>	Twin Cummins 330hp

Fuel consumption

RPM	1,000	1,200	1,400	1,600
<b>Speed</b>	8.2	9.1	9.8	10.0
<b>GPH</b>	4.2	8.4	13.7	21.0
<b>LPH</b>	18.7	37.43	61.02	93.57
<b>MPG</b>	2.24	1.25	0.83	0.5

On board was all the latest cruising equipment to make passage-making straightforward, including radar and a chart plotter. Living was comfortable with a well-appointed, modern and efficient galley packed full of built-in amenities including a large fridge, freezer, coffee machine and a microwave oven. Three separate sleeping cabins with two heads offer plenty of room for a charter part of six. On deck there is a tender, outboard motor and an on-deck gas barbecue. A fishing kit is not included in the inventory, but can be cheaply rented. Air-conditioning and a substantial generator make this one of the best-equipped bareboats we have encountered. The company presented it well, with easy-to-follow instructions on where everything was located and how it should be used. In short, we wanted for nothing.

THE HIGHS & LOWS

HIGHS

- | Potluck supper with happy US cruising folk
- | Ussepa Island
- | Drinking rum on Cabbage Cay
- | Watching dolphins leaping in our wake
- | Sighting wild pigs at the water's edge
- | The power of sterling – each British pound will buy you almost two US dollars

LOWS

- | Overcast days, high winds and rain in late October
- | Paying for a new propeller

# ANIMAL MAGIC

From dolphins and tortoises to osprey, wild hogs and alligators, the natural wonders of the sheltered Gulf Coast of Florida are an enticing backdrop to a bareboat charter **TEXT & PHOTOS** FRANCES & MICHAEL HOWORTH



Ugly and elusive: the protected manatee.

**T**hink of boating in Florida, and you think of Fort Lauderdale and Miami on the eastern seaboard. But there's a flip-side of Florida too, a west coast kissed by the Gulf of Mexico, with its share of yachting hotspots and a long protective barrier of islands. We chose to bareboat here, out of Fort Myers, 150 miles south of Tampa. Tucked away up the Okeechobee Waterway, this was the perfect base from which to explore the area's many islands and inlets, and experience the stunning wildlife. Our boat, the 1999 Mainship 43 *Sootsus At Sea*, was a comfortable 47-footer with three double cabins and plenty of deck space for six to relax without bumping into each other (we had four on

board). Chartered through Southwest Florida Yachts. Our adventure began when the company's co-owner Barbara Hansen greeted us warmly on arrival. General manager Marc Winkel then gave us our boat briefing and introduction to the local cruising area. We found Tom Lenfestey's *Cruising Guide* extremely useful for our route planning. With Marc's advice, we learnt about local speed limits and byelaws, and became familiar with manatee protection zones. We would respect their space, of course, but we did hope to catch a glimpse of these strange prehistoric animals. **Careful pilotage** Our first stop was Tarpon Point Marina, 12 miles from our base at Hancock Creek. It was also the location of our first food stop – Rum Runners restaurant. Since the safe anchorage outside the



Looking back at Pine Island.



Leaping beauty: dolphins toy in the wake.



No guys, it's this way!



The elegant lighthouse at Boca Grande.



The view from Boca Grande.



A brown pelican at Fisherman's Village.



Michael, with fellow charter guests Nigel and Sally, enjoy lunch aboard Sootsus At Sea.



Houses on Gasparilla Island with dry-stacked motor boats.

*“In true US cruising yacht fashion, a group of boaters had organised a potluck supper on the dock – and then they immediately invited us over”*

creek was recommended by Marc, we chose to swing on our hook overnight and take the dinghy ashore for supper. The next morning, we headed back into the Okeechobee Waterway and followed the markers. At Shell Point the lane narrows, so concentration and good chartwork are essential to avoid the bottom. After 20 minutes, we entered Miserable Mile, a narrow, well-marked channel that cuts across San Carlos Bay, and so named because of the swift tidal streams that run at 90° across our proposed course.

Once it had been negotiated, we passed south of St James City at the southern end of Pine Island, leaving Sanibel Island to port. As we hopped from one mile-marker to another, we kept a lookout for manatees, but disappointingly we failed to sight a single creature.

As Pine Island Sound shallows, so the dredged channel becomes narrower, and we followed the waterway between the beacons until we reached mile marker No.38. Here, we turned to port and made our way through the Roosevelt Channel leading to Tween Waters Marina & Captiva Island Yacht Club. I was told off for calling the marina “Tween the Sheets” over the VHF, but by the time

we reached the dock, they’d forgotten my faux pas and greeted us with open arms.

**Food on the foredeck**

In true US cruising yacht fashion, a group of boaters had organised a potluck supper on the dock, where it’s open house but you just bring a dish. Our arrival meant they had less room for their trestle table, but they immediately invited us over. “Bring some food and join the party,” they declared, and us four Brits were immediately made to feel right at home.

Captiva is a long, slender island whose natural beauty and tranquillity has attracted some spectacular beachfront real estate. We’d have liked more time to explore. The next day, we had another 15-mile hop northwards, winding our way through the channel and passing North Captiva Island to port. This island is without a bridge connection to its neighbours, so its interior State Park is only accessible by boat. We’d have liked to have stayed, but time was tight and we centered on past Cayo Costa, another State Park-designated island, Cabbage Cay and Ussepa Island, making a mental note that we should visit them

**NOTES FOR CHARTERERS**

**BE SURE TO TAKE:**

- Several pairs of binoculars (the boat has two but everyone will want a pair)
- A mobile phone that can be used in the US
- Polaroid sunglasses
- Good-quality sunblock
- Large-scale chart
- Wet-weather gear

**BOATERS BEWARE!**

- US charts show the depth in feet not metres
- The US IALA B buoyage system is the opposite to that used in Europe, and the cardinal buoyage system isn’t used in the US
- NE winds may reduce the charted depth of water in the area
- Channel markers are frequently missing or snap off at the waterline, and they often lie submerged
- Murky waters can frequently hide underwater dangers
- Marinas may not monitor Ch 16 – a mobile phone is a necessity
- Chart kits in book format are often of a scale too difficult to use
- During high season – December to March – dock space is very limited

*“Schools of dolphins played in our wake as we sped across the sound. The island is home to raccoons, rattlesnakes and even the occasional alligator”*

on our cruise home. We crossed the entrance to Charlotte Harbour south of Boca Grande at a spot known as Tarpon Alley, after the game fish. Every May, up to 100 boats drift with the tide in this narrow pass, their engines idle, ready to spring into action when the tarpon strike.

We then made for Boca Grande, allegedly the former home of famous pirate José Gaspar. He is a something of a local hero, and there is an annual festival in his name, although there is little evidence that he actually existed. (The Captiva Islands are so named because that’s where Gaspar held fair maidens for ransom – allegedly.)

**Have golf cart, will travel**

These days, the island’s main town of Boca Grande is home to a well-run marina and boasts fine restaurants, museums and quality shops. We docked at Boca Grande Marina, known locally as Miller’s Marina, and for \$50 hired a golf cart to explore the streets full of giant banyan trees and luxury homes, many of which back on to picturesque canals with their own private moorings. We also visited some fascinating old lighthouses. Our island lunch was at Seagrille,

located inside the town’s former theatre building, now a warren of pretty craft shops and boutiques.

We headed north through Gasparilla Sound – a shallow island-strewn lake, with shorelines of impressive mangrove swamps. But Gasparilla Marina at Placida was a disappointment after all those natural riches, as we were greeted by a lacklustre concrete housing complex and basic docks. The locals mainly use the area as a place to dry store their dayboats but the marina has little to offer cruising folk, unless you need repairs. Fortunately we didn’t, and so we headed back south into Charlotte Harbour. This large expanse of open water is at the confluence of several rivers, whose shorelines are full of inviting gunkholes (inlets and creeks with anchorages). The bottom here is mostly soft mud, but it can get shallow very quickly, so you’ll need to be careful, but we had the bonus of catching site of some wild pigs feeding at the water’s edge.

Charlotte Harbour is superb boating territory. A good base for a visiting motor boat is Burnt Store Marina, the largest on Florida’s west coast. Another is nine miles further north at Fisherman’s Village, where pelicans dry their wings on the

**A CAUTIONARY TALE**

Our charter contract made no mention of deductibles or damage insurance waivers. Within 15 minutes of leaving dock, and just as we increased the revs from idle to 1,200rpm for the very first time, our crew felt – and heard – severe vibrations from the starboard engine.

Fearing there was a rope around the propeller, we returned to the dock at idle speed. Once alongside, divers discovered a propeller with four badly distorted blades – clearly the result of an impact – yet while under the command of our skipper, the boat had never left the confines of the marina’s privately maintained channel. Since it was impossible to contest the damage, all repair costs plus charges from the diver to carry out the replacement, fell to the charter party. We also heard of another charter group, sitting at anchor in US waters, who watched in horror as their boat’s electronics went up in smoke after being hit by lightning. They were responsible for the bill to the full limit of the deductible, normally 10% of the value of the boat.

**The moral of the story:**

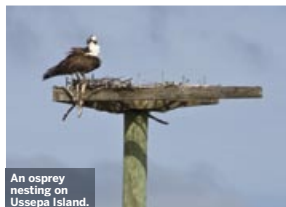
1. Consider additional insurance.
2. Read all charter contracts very carefully.
3. If in any doubt, show documents to someone who can give you professional advice.



*Sooty's At Sea* at its Marina town berth in North Fort Myers.



Michael on the wheel and Nigel on lookout duties off Fort Myers.



An osprey nesting on Ussepa Island.

*“The Mainship 43 offers something for everyone. There’s all the latest cruising equipment, and a modern and efficient galley packed full of amenities”*

pillings that mark the slips. The marina has its own shopping mall and myriad small restaurants, and it's a good starting point for exploration of the cities of Port Charlotte and Charlotte Harbour.

Twelve miles south of Fisherman's Village, the quaint town of Bokeelia beckons, situated at the northern end of Pine Island. The smaller islands around it are the former hunting and fishing grounds of the Calusa tribe of Native Americans.

**Where dolphins leap**

Schools of dolphins played in our wake as we sped across the sound towards Ussepa Island, a five-mile excursion from Bokeelia. This mile-long, privately owned 100-acre tropical is inhabited only by those who have been granted membership rights. Vic and Barbara Hansen, owners of the charter company, have a home here and invited us to overnight on the dock. Non-boating visitors can stay at the club-like Collier Inn, dating from 1908.

Vic took us for a tour in his golf cart – the only type of motorised transport allowed. The island is covered in exotic vegetation. Snake cactus winds up the tree trunks, wild orchids are everywhere,

and osprey roost in specially erected nesting poles. The island is also home to racoons, tree frogs, rattlesnakes and even the occasional alligator. – it's a wildlife-watcher's paradise.

Cabbage Cay is often crowded and used as an anchorage by cruising yachts without permits to visit Ussepa. It's a one-mile hop in a dinghy between the two. The bar on Cabbage Cay is famous for its dollar bill-festooned walls, a tradition started by visiting fishermen. You can make the return trip to Fort Myers in five hours at top speed, but exacting chartwork and marker spotting make it tough.

Instead, I'd recommend stops at St James City or Port Sanibel, inside sheltered Punta Rassa. From here it's a 16-mile hop to Fort Myers, where you can refill the yacht's tanks and pump out her black water, before returning to Hancock Creek and a final inspection from Southwest Florida Yachts.

It had been a great week at sea exploring an unspoiled part of a busy state, where the wonders of nature are never far away. And it was good to be aboard a boat that was well appointed, comfortable and safe, as well as to be reminded that there is life in Florida after Miami. **MBY**

**FACTFILE**



Marc (right) gives with Frances and Michael a pre-cruise briefing.

**GETTING THERE**

British Airways and Virgin Atlantic offer daily scheduled services from the UK into Miami. Fort Myers is a three-hour drive from Miami. You can also fly into Southwest Florida International Airport, since many major airlines serve Fort Myers from there.

**CHARTER COSTS**

A one-week charter for four people, aboard a similar yacht at the end of October 2008 will cost \$3,668 (approx. £1,834) rising to \$4,587 (£2,293) in high season. You'll need to add on the cost of fuel, plus self-catering or restaurant costs. This particular yacht consumes up to 21 US gallons per hour – to cover about ten miles – and with diesel fuel costing \$3.30 (January 2008) per gallon, the fuel costs for this trip added a further \$866 (£433).

**CHARTS, PILOT AND GUIDES**

We used *The Gunkholers' Cruising Guide to Florida's West Coast* by Tom Lenfestey, published by Great Outdoors ([www.floridabooks.com](http://www.floridabooks.com)). The yacht is equipped with a book of charts covering the entire area but quite honestly it's very difficult to read, so we purchased chart number 25E Barrier Islands/Boca Grande to Estero Bay published by Waterproof Charts Inc of Punta Gorda Florida. Very useful indeed. Visit: [www.waterproofcharts.com](http://www.waterproofcharts.com).

**PAPERWORK**

Surprisingly little. Southwest Florida Yachts insist on seeing the skipper's boating qualifications and there is a comprehensive questionnaire and charter contract you must complete before the charter can begin.

**WEATHER**

Our trip took place in late October at the beginning of the winter season and yes, we did have overcast days and rain was abundant. However, the area is incredibly diverse with much to see, so don't let the weather put you off visiting at this time of year. One point worth mentioning is that the hurricane season generally runs from August to October.

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