

Taking a Leap of Faith



This couple's perfect beachfront property turned out to be their boat

By the time my husband, Bob, and I disembarked from a busy cruise ship in Bora-Bora and boarded a 42-foot catamaran for a day of sailing around the island, we'd already invested close to a decade of vacationing in various exotic tropical locales in search of the perfect beachfront property to purchase. We hoped that one day it would become our retirement home. Our quest was proving to be daunting at best, as many

locations were too remote, had an unstable government, or were simply too expensive.

The proverbial lightbulb went off for us that day in Bora-Bora as we watched a tanned and youthful French couple handle a large catamaran in the balmy South Pacific breezes. They lived aboard, and to subsidize their lifestyle they spent three days a week sailing tourists around the area. We instantly fell in love with the romantic idea of living aboard a boat and sailing off into the sunset. No beachfront purchase would be necessary; we'd live where we wanted aboard a sailboat. The only glitch in our plan was that we didn't know how to sail. After the initial excitement wore off, I began to wonder if our plan was too far-

fetched. How could we possibly learn all we needed to know to live safely on the sea? I'd always believed that you had to have grown up sailing to accomplish what we now were proposing.

After returning to our home in northern Idaho, we began reading everything about sailing we could get our hands on while we waited for the spring thaw. When spring finally arrived, we began taking sailing lessons at the local marina near our home in Sandpoint, located on Lake Pend Oreille. A month later, we followed this up with a five-day liveaboard bareboat-handling course aboard a 42-foot Hunter in Washington state's San Juan Islands. All our newly discovered sailing friends warned us that due to

the weather patterns typically found in the San Juans at that time of year, the experience would determine if we loved or hated sailing. By the end of the week, we were hooked.

We stayed in Seattle long enough to purchase a 1980 J/24 that we trailered home so we could sail in the Thursday-night races at the local yacht club. Those new windblown friends advised us that if we wanted to learn to sail well in a short amount of time, we needed to learn to race and to do it as often as we could. We took this advice to heart. It was a tumultuous road, and the cliché about going to the "school of hard knocks" was never more appropriate.

Our early days consisted of emergency-room stitches for me (now I know why they call

BY LYNNE WALSH

it a boom), unintended man-, hat-, shoes-, and sunglasses-overboard drills, and rope-burned hands and ankles. We had halyards that got away, forcing us to send our lightest crewmember, Daris, up the mast several times in the bosun's chair. We even exchanged a few love taps at several marks while we were still learning the rules. The cost in wounded pride was far higher than the price of the beers we bought for the crews of the boats we fouled. We even had a crewmember's PFD inflate when the wind gusted to more than 40 knots during the 50-mile Labor Day race from Hope to Bayview. In that race, we had to execute what we still jokingly call our "survival tack;" it was simply a choice to tack in extreme



conditions or run aground. Not much to decide there!

Bob and I also survived a knockdown on the Fourth of July. While we lazily napped on warm, sun-baked decks, a fast-moving front with 60-

knot winds, heavy rain, and hail the size of golf balls descended on us before we could get the main down. The storm only lasted about four minutes, and miraculously the boat and our dog were un-

A SISTER SHIP TO LEAP OF FAITH, this PDQ Antares 44i (opposite page) reaches along the Lake Ontario shore near where it was built. Bob Walsh (left) maneuvers his new home for the first time. Bob and Lynne (below) provision Leap before their departure from Norfolk, Virginia.

scathed, but you can bet that anytime we're under sail, I still sleep with one eye open to watch the weather. Racing and cruising a sailboat have helped us understand every element of our boat and how those elements affect each other. These experiences have been invaluable in creating a bond of trust between Bob and me, which is the perfect recipe for success in long-term cruising.

Our first real test came when we decided to bareboat-charter a 42-foot catamaran in the British Virgin Islands for 10 days. I'll never forget the large lump in my throat as the dockhands cast off our lines and waved good-bye. "My God," I thought. "I sure hope we can pull this off."

Compared with our tiny and simple J/24, the cat seemed enormous and complicated. But by three days into the charter, we felt like old salts, and when the time came to return to the charter base, I actually cried. I knew with certainty that we'd discovered the lifestyle that was meant for us.

The next year, we traded in our J/24 for a J/30, and over the next five years we continued racing locally—averaging approximately 50 races a season. We read voraciously, chartered bareboats, and attended boat shows to educate ourselves about the many catamarans available. We finally decided to buy a 44-footer built by PDQ Yachts, in Whitby, Ontario.

The construction of our boat—to be called *Leap of Faith*—took a year. During



that time, we began cutting the ties that tethered us to land. Amid many raised eyebrows and looks of astonishment, we sold our home, our thriving construction business, and our J/30.

As *Leap of Faith* neared completion, we anxiously awaited the day when we'd meet her and the PDQ Yachts delivery captain in Norfolk, Virginia. We then planned to take three weeks to sail the approximately 800 miles down the U.S. East Coast to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where we'd leave *Leap of Faith* moored temporarily while we reluctantly returned to the frozen tundra back home to tidy up the last few details. Our plan was to travel south on the Intracoastal Waterway, and we'd head outside to sail in the Atlantic when the weather permitted.

When we arrived in Norfolk in late November 2006 with two adventurous friends, we encountered severe storms that kept us in port for four days. Right off the bat, our delivery schedule was beginning to look tight. When the storms finally cleared on November 28, we headed out into the cold North Atlantic Ocean. Only one crewmember had any offshore experience, and Bob and I could draw on only a few charter trips to the Caribbean. After a quick lesson on the proper use of jacklines and harnesses, we set a three-hour watch schedule, and our adventure finally began.

The first leg of our shakedown cruise from Norfolk to Beaufort, North Carolina, lasted 36 hours. Bob trolled a line off the stern, and a few hours later we were barbecuing a beautiful tuna. With our bellies full and our spirits high, we sailed into our first sunset with a reefed main in 30 knots of wind just aft of the beam and six-foot seas.

Unfortunately, our first evening at sea brought about severe seasickness for me and for our only crewmember with offshore sailing experience, which left Bob firmly planted at the helm all night with minimal assistance from his ailing crew. However, when we rounded Cape Hatteras at 0630, he said he felt absolutely euphoric. He'd just sailed his brand-new yacht around one of the most treacherous capes on the Eastern Seaboard to greet a gorgeous sunrise.

As we entered Beaufort the following night, we encountered fog, which brought on a wave of fear in us all. We were exhausted, entering an unknown

port, and motoring blind. We had a state-of-the-art Raymarine E-120 chart plotter, but knowing our own inexperience, we were reluctant to rely on it alone to navigate the narrow channel to the recommended anchorage. With high-powered flashlights in hand, two of us stood on the cold foredeck and looked for channel markers. We relayed the information to Bob, and he was able to confirm every marker on the chart plotter and guide us safely into the anchorage. Once again, technology had made the art of navigation accessible to even the novice cruiser. We never doubted our trusty chart plotter again, but we still keep paper charts at the ready. Luckily, we located a vacant mooring, tied off, and celebrated with midnight beers.

Ashore the following day, we bought a supply of scopolamine patches and effectively avoided further seasickness throughout the remainder of the voyage.

Once we'd all recuperated from the first leg of our journey, the weather was still in our favor, so we ventured outside again. The winds were light and variable, so we alternated between sailing and motoring. This gave us plenty of opportunity to become proficient at setting and trimming the main and genoa, and then dousing them.

We averaged approximately 90 miles per day and anchored almost every night. We quickly fell into the old "early to bed, early to rise" pattern, as each sunset meant another fabulous meal would be offered from our well-equipped galley. We'd eat while listening to the weather forecasts and planning the following day's passage. As on any boat, caution was the watchword; anchoring in new and unfamiliar areas was initially nerve-wracking. Bob found he couldn't sleep, so he checked the anchor's holding every few hours. As we became more proficient, we also became more confident, and eventually we were able to set the anchor and go to sleep, secure in our blossoming cruising abilities.

Since we were on a schedule, lingering over morning coffee and watching the sunrise were luxuries denied. We'd be up at 0600, checking the engines, pulling the hook, and wiping the condensation off the dodger. We'd fix breakfast while motoring back outside for another day of southbound sailing.

We traveled down the ICW only one day of the entire trip, when the forecast called for moderate southerly winds and heavy seas. Smoothly motoring down the ditch was a welcome respite from sailing in the rolling seas; we spent that day napping on the warm and sunny trampolines between the hulls, delighted in watching the dolphins frolic just off either bow, and worked on our VHF communication techniques with the bridge tenders.

The passage was a tremendous education; it was the practical side of the three-day "university" that PDQ Yachts had put on for us and 18 other clients just four months earlier. (See "PDQU," *Passage Notes*, January 2007.) Though designed to be cruised by a couple, these cats are still complicated pieces of craftsmanship. One must be proficient in sailhandling and diesel-engine maintenance and understand the inverter, the refrigeration system, the generator, the watermaker, solar panels, and the highly sophisticated satellite navigation and weather systems that are standard equipment. Fortunately, PDQ Yachts' efficient customer-service team was always just a phone call away to help us work out the teething problems that naturally occur on any new boat during the course of a voyage.

For me, the best part of the passage was while we were sailing off the coast of Florida. I'd just settled into the cockpit with a cup of coffee to start my solitary sunset watch when a large whale breached about 50 yards off our starboard side. It appeared to be heading south. This magnificent moment felt as if it had been created just for me. I imagined that the whale was saying, "Yes, you're on the right path. Follow me." We've heeded this message, and continue south we shall. In May, the final ties to our land life were severed, and we moved aboard full time to begin living our dream of sailing the Caribbean and South Pacific.

Bob and I feel that if we can do this, anyone can. All it really requires is the desire to cast off the lines of fear and uncertainty, passionately embrace the future, and take your own—*Leap of Faith!*

Lynne Walsh and her husband, Bob, are living aboard *Leap of Faith* with their dog, Mollie, enjoying the cruising life, and living their dream.