

TAKING TIME OUT



“Spending time” took on a completely new meaning as we cruised . . .

by Anne Hays

We called our 40-foot sloop *Time Out*. When we sailed her away on a year’s cruise, we expected to return the following spring satiated with the vagabond life and ready to move ashore and go back to work. We viewed the cruise as a long vacation, as a 12-month battery charge, as a lark, an adventure, a 365-day long weekend.

We had not spent the evenings before we left as most expectant cruisers claim to — hunched over piles of charts and cruising guides planning every nautical mile of the trip. We considered that stratum of preparation unnecessary for the type of coastal cruising we anticipated, and, being unnecessary, it simply did not fit into our pre-cruise schedule. Too many other things had to be done before we could go. Besides, one of the things we looked forward to was an unstructured life and the ability to go wherever we wished. Why buy charts

“Today we could bake bread, go snorkeling, invite the folks from the newly arrived boat in the anchorage over to share whatever fish we speared, and study the next chapter in our celestial navigation book — or none of the above if something better came along. In our unstructured life, time became our friend and ally.”

for the Bahamas when we might decide to go to Mexico instead?

On most mornings we got out of bed excited about the possibilities and not intimidated by the requirements. Maintaining the boat and ourselves — an oil change, a windlass repair, a

search for a grocery store or a laundry — demanded only a small portion of our time. Otherwise, we were free to sail or sit at anchor, to snorkel or snoop around a town, to practice new skills, to pursue whatever took our fancy. Sundown followed sunup. Once in a while I cleaned the stove (the most effective way I know to make time drag) just to slow things down a bit.

Instead of getting up in the morning and saying, “Today I’m going to sail to Staniel Cay and pick up the mail because I know some is there,” we learned to check the weather. If today we’d have to beat to Staniel, why not wait until tomorrow when the wind would clock around, and we could have a nice broad reach all the way? Today we could bake bread, go snorkeling, invite the folks from the newly arrived boat in the anchorage over to share whatever fish we speared, and study the next chapter in our celestial navigation book — or none of the above if something better

came along. In our unstructured life, time became our friend and ally.

When we sailed from Florida to the Bahamas, time to wait made the difference between a delightful day-sail and a seasickening thrash. The day we planned to go, a northerly wind blowing against the Gulfstream kicked up menacing, square waves, and the course to Gun Cay was a beat all the way. The next day, the day we actually went, we spent on a comfortable broad reach, the off watch napping and the deck watch practicing single-note puckers on the harmonica.

Time gave us the ability to sit out a January blow, snug and cozy in a cove at Punta Blanca on Florida's west coast, and afterward enjoy good sailing on a 24-hour passage from Boca Grande Pass to the Dry Tortugas. On one such Saturday night, Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion," coming aboard via our little portable radio, provided a lifeline on my dark solo watch. Another night, a radio call from a friend wishing us good luck as we left the harbor at midnight reminded us that someone knew we were out there and cared. The warm glow that gave us lasted until our landfall in the morning.

We had dashed up and down the Intracoastal Waterway on other boats — starting at daylight and stopping at dark — too tired to do anything but eat a bite of supper and go to bed, a dated plane ticket back to our nine-to-five lives waiting for us at Hilton Head or Fort Lauderdale. As long-term cruisers now, we puttered along with the rest of the snowbirds, rendezvousing with new friends at the anchorages for a happy hour or a potluck supper or browsing

“Among all the lessons learned, the most lasting and important was neither how to safely negotiate a lock on the Erie Canal nor how to navigate through a Maine fog. It was an appreciation for time; the realization that what time we squander today will not be available tomorrow.”

through whatever town beckoned us after a few hours “on the road.”

We gradually realized that what had started out to be a vacation or a lark, a mid-life dalliance, had become something more. In our 50s, when most of the daily tasks ashore demanded only that we repeat what we already knew how to do, we learned new skills and rejoiced in knowing we could. At a stage when we had come to rely on a circle of old friends and family, we constantly met new people whose friendship we now prize. As we pointed Time Out's bow toward new horizons, our personal horizons broadened.

Among all the lessons learned, the most lasting and important was neither how to safely negotiate a lock on the Erie Canal nor how to navigate through

a Maine fog. It was an appreciation for time; the realization that what time we squander today will not be available tomorrow. Something we don't do today, we may never be able to do.

Does it seem paradoxical that, during this cruise, when we had more unstructured time and better control over our time, with less interference from other people than ever before, we both developed a keener appreciation of the value of time? I have concluded that when our time is directed by or demanded by others, it loses value for us, and we give up large segments of it with little consideration or resentment. When time is ours to use as we choose, it becomes more precious.

That trite, oft-spoken phrase “spending time” took on a completely new meaning as we cruised. Time became currency allowing us to buy the ability to wait until the weather was good for a passage, to linger in a place we liked or to leave one we didn't like at any hour.

The importance of spending time wisely did not fade when we returned ashore. Spending time has become as valid an activity as, and one to be done as consciously and more carefully than, spending money. Money, though never infinite in supply, can for us usually be replenished by some means. Even when we're desperate, there is no bank we can rob that will yield a fortune in precious time.

From *Through the Spyglass*, by Anne Hays. Anne Hays is a freelance writer specializing in boating. She is the co-author of three other books — *Chesapeake Kaleidoscope*, *A Cruising Guide to the Chesapeake*, and *A Cruising Guide to the Caribbean*.