
WE DID IT!

DROPPING OUT



Christie Gorsline is at the helm as *Nanook* heads for first landfall, Isla Gaudalupe, Mexico.

by Christie Gorsline

In the prime of our lives and careers my husband and I voluntarily made a radical change. We bought a 37' sailboat and equipped her to sail around the world. Instead of continuing to work at jobs that had grown tedious and unfulfilling, we stepped off the corporate treadmill.

With both our girls in college, we wanted to abandon suburbia and live differently. We chose a lifestyle based on travel and adventure. We knew that we could, and quite probably should, continue to work full time until a more traditional retirement age. Since childhood we had been programmed by

American tradition and habit to work long hours in order to earn as much as possible so that we could buy increasingly larger homes and newer cars. Instead, we determined that our contract with America had been fulfilled.

We quite easily reached the decision to leave the workday routine, but the choice to do it by sail wasn't automatic. En route to the decision to travel by

sail we discarded countless versions of traveling full time. I just couldn't picture packing a duffle bag and wandering the world by train. I couldn't envision getting off an airplane in a foreign country and looking for an apartment. But the idea of going by sailboat

meant I'd be taking a version of a home with me. That made sense.

Friends and co-workers were a mixture of horrified and envious. We planned to "live everyone's dream" and yet, they were appalled that we would simply "quit." Of course, a decision that major is simple only in retrospect. Our progression from suburban commuter to



Christie Gorline leaves a memento at the Cruisers' Shrine in Bahia San Juanico, in the Sea of Cortez on the Baja of Mexico.

corporate defector took on a life of its own.

We didn't own a sailboat and scarcely knew the basics of sailing. We joined a sailing club and began weekend chartering, learning how to sail as we explored. We took boating classes that included navigation, weather and safety.

At our first "Basics of Boating" course the instructor asked the students to introduce themselves, their boats, and their experience. Each boater described his or her vessel, from 20- to 40-foot sail and powerboats, and how many years they'd been boating. When it was our turn, we eagerly announced, "We don't have a boat yet, but we're going to buy one and sail around the world." Knowledgeable boaters in the room chuckled amicably. We were eager, confident and obviously naïve.

We toured boat shows and talked to boat brokers. Asking questions, walking miles of docks, and looking at the boats, we gained some knowledge of what kind of sailboats were suitable for offshore, "blue water" cruising. Ultimately, we purchased a 1979, 37' Crealock, Pacific Seacraft, cutter design. We thought she was elegant below decks and sturdy enough to go where

we planned. She had a tiller instead of a wheel, green canvas instead of the standard blue, and her name was *Nanook*, the Inuit Indian word for polar bear. All of that appealed to us, and suddenly she was ours.

Moving aboard a small sailboat meant leaving behind the accumulation of stuff that had clung to us over the years. I disposed of former treasures at a series of yard sales and rented a storage unit for the bits of furniture, ski equipment, winter clothes and memorabilia that we would use to jump-start our lives when we stopped wandering.

I enrolled in classes called "Medicine at Sea" and "The Offshore Cook." We took part in a weekend seminar demonstrating rescue-at-sea techniques. I took scuba diving classes and Ham radio license exams. Finally, we sold our home in the suburbs, quit our jobs, and closed the bank account. It took six years from the time we decided to "live differently" until we were ready to go.

Our suburban lifestyle had involved a cycle of work-and-spend that kept us on the capitalistic treadmill. But stepping off the corporate pedals created a shift. Now we intended to live by wind power and our wits. We stowed the

dock lines and left the United States, headed south and west, toward Mexico. We were going to sail around the world.

One morning after a few days of offshore sailing, Rick was sitting quietly in the cabin with his coffee cup in one hand and a pencil in the other, fully engrossed in a yellow legal pad on the table. When I asked what he was doing, he looked up as if I'd broken a spell.

"Planning my sales meeting," he chuckled.

I replied, "Well, look in the mirror, because that's all that's left of your sales team."

Rick knew that most of the tasks he was listing, such as "check the clasp on the port cockpit locker, find a better place to store the storm drogue, test the spinnaker, and pour vinegar in the head," were things he would do himself. But the habit of running a weekly sales meeting was going to take

time to abate. As our time at sea lengthened, Rick began to accept that he wasn't on vacation, that this was permanent, at least for now. Our retreat from life as we had known it was a gradual thing, and the transition had begun.

Part of the shift was realizing that what had been important in our land-based life had become irrelevant. On board a small sailboat in the middle of the ocean, daily mail, telephones, cars and televisions don't exist. The things that we had thought were necessities had become obsolete. Now we communicated via Ham radio with other boats and occasionally to a shore-based message-relay volunteer. We learned to use electricity conservatively because our supply came from solar panels and running the engine. Our mail was forwarded in bundles to a Mexican post office every couple of months, marked *lista de correos*. The Mexican Post Office complied by holding the bundle for our arrival and listing our name on the post office wall, indicating that mail was waiting. We didn't even have pressurized water or refrigeration. And once we had made the adjustment, we didn't miss them.

Our values changed. At sea we were entertained by dancing dolphins in the daytime and an umbrella of stars overhead at night. We took great delight in simple things that we had taken for granted or ignored on land. When the wind blew from the right direction it meant a comfortable point of sail and a break from the diesel engine. I learned to cook using unfamiliar products because that's what was available in foreign markets. Catching a dorado meant not having canned stew for dinner. Anchoring in the arms of a comfortable bay, we could bathe in the sea, take a freshwater solar shower, and it all felt more joyous than the best bubble bath and massage. We embraced the joy of making new friends who were equally unhurried: sharing books, unbridled time and tall tales.

The grace I found in my travels took my life in new directions. I woke up to the concept that there are lots of ways to spend a day. The comfortable patterns I had established for managing a day were familiar but not necessarily the only way. The more villages I ex-

plored, the more I wanted to see. The more the corners of my mind were pruned loose by new possibilities of ways to shape a life, the more I yearned to explore. I learned that "home" is a concept, not a street address. Like a turtle, I learned to be at home wherever I was.

I changed in small increments over the years of our travels. Like a jeweler reshaping a precious piece of metal by hundreds of small taps with a forging hammer, the events of our eight-year time-out slowly shifted the way I view myself and the way I relate to those around me.

By immersing myself in new geographies I became a new person. I am more forgiving of myself and others. I gained a small understanding of other cultures that has made me think differently about things. I no longer presume that the American way of being is more right than another. Americans work long hours and take short vacations. We buy big cars and new furniture. We buy so much that we need to rent storage space to hold it all. We buy frozen food and unripe vegetables because effi-

ciency is our mantra. We believe that those who are on time are better people than those who are late. These are American ways of being. Traveling slowly taught me that there are other ways to live.

In the process of slowing down I bumped into a new thought. I had the realization that something in me had loosened, the way a knot loosens, and I allowed myself the freedom to just "be." Over the years, without noticing it, I'd subscribed to the notion that a busy life was the same thing as a satisfying life. Now I'm discovering the difference.

As a result of our wanderings, I'm becoming a writer, taking piano lessons, trying to learn foreign languages. I'm no longer afraid to fail. Moving aboard I learned that I had the skills — and the nerve — to make a radical change. I don't want my life to whip past me at 60 miles per hour, and in the end realize that I'd missed the view. I am becoming the person I want to spend the rest of my life being.