



Beautiful Georgian and Victorian homes
line the waterfront in Hertford.

THE GREAT ALBEMARLE SOUND

North Carolina's
Rough Cut Cruising Gem

BY CLAIBORNE S. YOUNG

“**W**ere a marine architect to set up an ideal location for a new colony, he might first round up thousands of acres of level agricultural and timber lands . . . In the middle of the land he would place an inland sea completely sheltered from oceanic disturbance . . . The sea would be long (say 60 miles) . . . but fairly narrow. To facilitate its crossing it would taper as it progressed inland . . . At frequent intervals there would be large rivers pouring into the sea . . . These would keep it fresh . . . wishing to give this body of water a beautiful forested shoreline and then drench it with sunshine, history and romance . . . This precisely is Albemarle Sound, a brilliant gem.”

Thus wrote publisher, Bill Sharpe in a 1954 edition of “The State” magazine. It is to all our good fortune that

his description is just as true today as it was those many years ago.

The Albemarle is the second largest sound on the North Carolina coastline, occupying a large swath of the state’s northeastern corner. The sound is fed by no less than nine rivers, all of which are readily navigable. Three of these streams are part of the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, while the others are far less visited. Taken as a whole, the Albemarle and its rivers represent the largest, relatively undiscovered cruising ground in the Southeastern United States.

Now for the bad news. The Albemarle Sound has the deserved reputation of sporting the roughest inland waters on the Eastern Seaboard. North Carolina’s two predominant wind directions, southwest and northeast, tend to funnel all the way up or down the sound’s entire length. Coupled with the relatively shallow depths (only about 15 to 18 feet along its mid-line), this

long wind fetch often spawns short (close together), steep chop which can sometimes jar the fillings out of your teeth.

Fortunately, this is not always the case, and most of the Albemarle’s rivers are not usually subject to such rough conditions. Plan your cruise of the sound’s waters for a day of fair weather and light winds. Your insides will be ever so appreciative of the extra patience.

Come with us on a virtual cruise of the Albemarle to gain a perspective of what these waters have to offer the cruising community. Then again, even when we are through, there is still so much more that could be said about the many gunkholing and exploration possibilities of the Great Albemarle Sound.

Let us begin by following the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway (AICW) south from Norfolk, Virginia. Near Statute Mile 7, the Waterway divides into two alternate passages. While those in a

hurry, or mariners piloting vessels drawing more than 5 feet, should probably continue south on the so-called, “North Carolina – Virginia Cut,” we will turn west on Deep Creek, the northernmost section of the Dismal Swamp Canal Route.

This alternate leg of the Waterway, as its name implies, follows the historic Dismal Swamp Canal, for much of its length. After passing through a lock at Deep Creek, Virginia, your vessel will enter the canal, and what a special ecological cruising experience it can be.

My favorite time on the Dismal is early morning. The water always looks to me like coffee, with just a kiss of cream. The canal stretches out before you in two arrows straight stretches, and often looks as if it disappears off into infinity. It doesn't get much more memorable than this!

Let us quickly note, however, that the Dismal Swamp Canal has its navigational challenges, and is best suited for those who have the time to take it slow. Fast moving vessels can stir up bottom debris, and bent props and shafts can sometime be the less than desirable result. You should also call the US Army Corps of Engineers Office in Great Bridge, VA (757-547-2109) or the Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center (252-771-8333), to make sure the canal is open and the locks are operating on a normal schedule. Occasionally drought conditions can result in reduced lockings, or outright closure.

Soon after crossing into North Carolina, the passage runs by the Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center, the only currently operating on-the-water, state sponsored welcome center in the USA. You can tie up here overnight free of charge. Director Penny Leary Smith and her fine staff provide a warm and knowledgeable greeting, but don't look for dockside power connections, fresh water hookups or shoreside showers.

After passing through a second lock at the tiny village of South Mills, NC, your craft will nose its way into the Pasquotank River. This is a lovely stream with some excellent overnight anchorages.

If you are so inclined to drop the hook, consider the waters behind Goat Island (near Statute Mile 43.5) or the deep nook along the river's southeastern banks, 0.3 nautical miles south, southwest of the chartered railroad bridge near Camden.

After cruising through a bascule highway bridge, your track will lead to the Elizabeth City waterfront. For many years, this community has been famous up and down the AICW for its “Rose Buddie” welcome. Fred Fearing or one of his fellow “Rose Buddie” volunteers would arrive by golf cart and present all the female members of the crew with roses, and everyone with a mountain of pamphlets describing pretty much everything in Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County. Sadly, Fred passed away a few years ago, but the town's tradition of cruiser friendly hospitality lives on.

Elizabeth City's current mayor, Steve Atkinson, is a cruiser himself, and he, plus the entire city staff, is intent on maintaining the tradition of cruiser hospitality which Fred fostered for so many years. And, what could be more hospitable than the Mariner's Wharf city docks, where you can moor for up to 48 hours free of charge. Again, don't look for any power or water connections, but the entire downtown business district is within each walking distance, as are a host of fine dining spots.

After a reluctant departure from the Elizabeth City waterfront, our cruise continues south down the Pasquotank River to the waters of Albemarle Sound. Surprisingly, there is only a single opportunity for sheltered overnight anchorage along the way.

Hopefully, we have arrived at the Albemarle on a day of light breezes, and make a turn to the west with our bow cleaving only a little chop. To the north, our eager craft bypasses the Little River. While this is a beautiful stream, it cannot boast any marinas, and only a few secure anchorages.

Next up, also along the sound's northern shoreline, is the enchanting Perquimans River. This is one of the



Canadian geese enjoying the quiet Edenton waterfront.





Mackey's Marina located on Mackey's Creek on the southern shoreline of the Albemarle Sound.



One of North Carolina's most picturesque waterfronts, Columbia offers free dockage at the city docks.

most beautiful streams anywhere on the North Carolina coastline, so we heed the siren's song and turn north, northwest up the Perquiman's delightful length. Notice the cypress clad shoreline, with many trees trailing beards of grey moss.

After a cruise of some 10.5 nautical miles upstream on the Perquimans, your track will lead to the fixed, Highway 17 Bypass Bridge. If your vessel cannot clear this span's 33-foot vertical clearance, you must retrace your steps to the sound. All others should proceed onward, and followed the marked passage through the "S" shaped swing bridge which serves the old river village of Hertford, NC.

Upstream of the swing bridge, you can anchor in a delightful north running section of the river. It's then a simple matter to dinghy ashore at a small park and set of public launching ramps which you will spot along the southern shoreline as you cruise to the anchorage.

Take a stroll on Church Street (Business Highway 17), through Hertford's small downtown business district. I've always said that if you took the cars and power lines away, it would be very easy to believe that you had somehow

slipped back to a simpler, bygone time. Don't miss Hertford Hardware. If you, like this writer, grew up in a small, southern town, it will feel like coming home.

Back down the Perquimans, and west once again on Albemarle Sound to the marked channel leading north to Edenton. This is one of North Carolina's oldest and most historic communities, with many Colonial and Revolutionary era homes and public buildings. Don't miss a stroll on the nearby village green. If you spot some of the local citizenry in tri-corn hats, check to see if your time machine has been a little too efficient.

Most cruisers who visit Edenton berth at the city marina. This facility lies at the northern foot of the marked channel leading in from the sound. Years ago, there was only a forgettable, single pier here, wide open to the Albemarle's often choppy conditions. Fortunately, the docks were greatly expanded several years ago, and, more importantly, a protective breakwater was built. Cruisers can now make use of this facility with confidence.

And, once again, the downtown business and historic distance is within easy walking distance. Don't miss dinner

THE SALTY SOUTHEAST

CRUISERS' NET

www.cruisersnet.net

CRUISERS HELPING CRUISERS
FREE AND OPEN TO ALL!
NO NEED TO REGISTER OR SUBSCRIBE

**Cruiser to Cruiser
 Information Exchange, Marina
 Directories, Anchorage
 Directories, Fuel Price Reporting,
 AICW Problem Stretches, Photo of
 the Week, Special "Florida
 Anchoring Rights" Page**

at Watermans Grill, and a visit to the historic Cupola House and St. Paul's Church.

Now, it's time to turn our course back to the east, and check out two of the many cruising possibilities along the Albemarle's southern shoreline. First up is Mackey's Creek (sometimes charted as Kendrick Creek). This small stream holds minimum 5 ½ foot depths (with most soundings being much deeper), and leads around a few twists and turn to one of the most surprising marina and dining attractions anywhere.

Mackey's Creek Marina overlooks the creek's northern shores, soon after its host stream takes a sharp turn to the west. Here you will find good dockage, and, surprisingly, haul-out repairs. The biggest and best attraction, however, is Mackey's Crab Bar and Grille. Open Thursdays through Sundays; let's not beat about the bush concerning this dining attraction. It provides some of the best seafood you will discover any-time, anywhere, period!

Back downstream on Mackey's Creek, through the Albemarle Sound bascule bridge, and another cruise of some 18.5 nautical miles will lead to the northern mouth of the Scuppernong River. So impressed were early European colonists with this stream's beauty, they named it "Hearts Delight." The Scuppernong is still a beautiful river, and few will leave its waters with anything but fond memories.

Upstream on the Scuppernong, cruisers will discover the delightful river village of Columbia, North Carolina. There are free city docks at which to berth, and a private marina that offers full services. Here you will also find the Tyrrell County Visitors Center (203 Ludington Drive, 252-796-0723), dedicated to the preservation and understanding of the coastal North Carolina wetlands.

Downtown Columbia also boasts an unusual gift shop known as Pocosin Arts. Proprietress, Feather Phillips, offers some of the most eco-friendly gifts to be found anywhere.

Now, it's finally time to bring our Albemarle Sound cruise to an end. You can continue east on the Sound's waters to an intersection with AICW, and turn south down mighty Alligator River, or north up, appropriately named, North River. This latter passage leads to the marina rich village of Coinjock, and eventually all the way back to Norfolk, VA.

I hope you have enjoyed our cruise of the Albemarle and its fascinating rivers as much as this writer. Truly, these waters and lands are the sort where new miracles and adventures await cruisers around every bend. It would probably take a lifetime or two to experience all the Albemarle's wonders, but in our cruise, we have found some of the best.

Good luck and good cruising to all! ❖

Article written by Claiborne S. Young from Salty Southeast Cruisers' Net (<http://www.CruisersNet.net>)