

# Boating the Blue Highway

By Katie O'Connell



*Bob and Kemba DeGroot adapted to a new life aboard their 49 foot Defever in May 2009. Their lifelong trip will include transiting many of the waterways in the Eastern United States and completing the Great Loop, running a business from their boat and battling mother nature.*

Taking on the enormous task of circumnavigating the eastern United States on water certainly doesn't become a reality overnight, so it's no surprise that Bob and Kemba DeGroot have a good story to tell. Their ambitious adventure started 12 years ago, and since then they've radically altered their lifestyle to make their dream come true.

The first step was modernizing their business—a successful sales training venture—to include the Web. They adopted a virtual-business model and converted their classroom-style programs to interactive Web sessions. Kemba and Bob now both work full time aboard

*Spirit Dancer*, Bob writing the Web-based courses and Kemba running overall operations. They also moved their land residence to a “lock and leave,” loft-style apartment in the Woodlands area of Houston, Texas. A management company maintains the property. The DeGroots consider their true home to be aboard *Spirit Dancer*, their 49-foot Defever trawler-style yacht.

Kemba and Bob share a passion for traveling and for the water, and it was no surprise to their friends when they undertook the challenge of circling the country. Bob served in the U.S. Coast Guard for six years, which is when he

**(From Top)**  
Bob and Kemba DeGroot enjoy the 4th of July aboard *Spirit Dancer* in Columbus, MS

The DeGroots officially began their Great Loop tour on Sept. 19, 2009 as they departed Green Turtle Bay Marina in Grand Rivers, KY. When they return to Green Turtle Bay they will be “crossing their wake” and closing the “loop”.

A crane lifts *Spirit Dancer* out of the parking lot of the Lakewood Yacht Club where it was left by Hurricane Ike.

The DeGroots thoroughly enjoyed a visit to Cuba Landing Marina, in Waverly, TN in mid September.

Kemba and Bob DeGroot enjoy the relaxing but fun atmosphere of traveling the waterways while living aboard.

The DeGroots live aboard their 49 foot Defever Trawler-style yacht.

Bob enjoys a Cuban cigar while docked at Cuba Landing Marina in Waverly, TN.

A BoatU.S. Surveyor assesses the damage to *Spirit Dancer* from Hurricane Ike.



fell in love with the Gulf Coast ICW. Of all the segments in their journey, he is most excited about completing the entire ICW which he explains, “runs from Brownsville, Texas to New Jersey. It’s a canal cut across the land, but also uses rivers, bays and lakes as part of its route.” After completing the ICW, Kemba and Bob will push on to transit new and exciting waterways. “Going north from New Jersey you continue past New York up the Hudson River to the Erie Canal to Lake Ontario. Through the Great Lakes to Chicago and on to the Illinois River. Next comes the Mississippi with a left turn onto the Ohio River, Tennessee River and down to Mobile, Alabama,” says Bob.

Originally the DeGroots planned to embark on the maiden part of their voyage in October 2008 but faced a major last-minute setback: Hurricane Ike. Even though Ike was classified a category-two hurricane, it had a surge equivalent of a category-five storm. In September 2008, Ike battered and destroyed areas up and down the Gulf Coast. The DeGroots’ boat, *Spirit Dancer*, got lashed along with everything else. As Bob says, “She fought her way ashore, bringing the four pilings she was tied to with her, and settled out in the parking lot of the Lakewood Yacht Club.” When she was lifted back into the water after Ike passed, the engine miraculously fired right up. The damage *Spirit Dancer*



## DeGroot’s Cruise Notes

### Mobile, AL to Sandestin, FL

“We’ve been averaging around 8 knots most days. We’re usually underway by 7AM and docked between 2-3 PM each day. Dark at 5PM”

*Mileage below is based on mile markers on the GIWW.*

#### Dog River Marina, Mobile, AL (23 nm)

“This is a large repair facility with a travel lift and West Marine store on property. Courtesy cars are available and Mike and Ricky on the fuel dock are there to support your every move. Middleton Marine provides quality mechanical services at fair prices. We highly recommend them.”

#### Homeport Marina, Gulf Shores, AL (23 nm)

“As you approach hail the marina on 16, switch and answer on 68. Steve met us on the dock and guided us in. Thanks to Marinalife’s attention to detail, Capt. Craig had us already checked us in by the time we got to the fuel dock. This is a marina that is built to ride out most any storm. This is a not-to-miss stop on the GIWW.”

#### Orange Beach Marina, Orange Beach, AL (11 nm)

“Getting in is easy from the Gulf but requires some seamanship and navigation skills to access from the GIWW. It is best to pull up the marina on Google Earth first. Once you see it from that perspective, its easy to find. Of the two on-site restaurants we chose the informal and fun setting of Calypso Joes Caribbean Grill. The chef hails from Jamaica and we promise you won't be disappointed.”

#### Palafox Pier Yacht Club, Pensacola, FL (26 nm)

The concrete breakwater protects the floating docks and the slips are wide and easy to access. You’re right downtown. There were festivals going on all around from the fire truck pull competition amongst the areas high schools and other groups, to bands in the square, to old town excavation, restored buildings, and museums all just two blocks off Palafox street.

#### Baytowne Marina, Sandestin, FL (54 nm)

“The marina is easy to access off the GIWW and the staff and other boaters lend a hand to help you in. Easy stern in docking in the wide slips. The Tram takes you where you need to go all around the huge resort including the Publix grocery. They have a courtesy car as well. One fellow Marine Trawler Owners Association member didn’t bat an eye when he offered us the keys to his Suburban.”

**“It will take several years or a lifetime to travel the loop and take side trips to see the Caribbean, go through the canal, and then motor up the Inland Passage on the west coast.” - Bob DeGroot**



(From Top)  
Bob explores the grounds of Orange Beach Marina in Alabama.

Kemba and Bob attend The Ronald McDonald House Fire Truck Pull charity event at Seville Quarter in downtown Pensacola. Here Kemba gets a hug from the Hamburglar!  
Lucy Buffett's restaurant, "Lulu's" serves great food at a very reasonable price. Fast and friendly.

The DeGroot's try to meet with friends in the various cities they are visiting. Here they visit with friends in Orange Beach, AL.

suffered was purely cosmetic—which, as any boater knows, isn't to say that fixing her was easy or cheap, but eight months later, in May 2009, the DeGroots finally set sail. They used the summer months to explore the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and its environs, stopping in such places as Nashville, Tennessee; Grand Rivers, Kentucky; and Columbus, Mississippi. To date they've cruised through most of the Gulf Coast and plan to spend the majority of the winter in the Florida Keys, transiting north along the east coast of Florida.

When Kemba and Bob arrive at a new port they pull out their laptops, attend to any business, and then set out to have some fun. "We do online research about the communities we'll be visiting," says Bob, "so we'll be sure to catch any top local attractions. In Louisiana, we took a side trip to Avery Island to tour the original Tabasco factory and country store." They also often make new friends. Explains Bob, "We have a fairly large upper deck and it's fun to hang a disco ball, put on some great '60s and '70s music, and turn the night into something festive. After one club event in Offatts Bayou, near Galveston, we had more than a dozen people dancing and getting down on what everyone now calls 'the Lido deck.' We're ready to party at a moment's notice."

Taking on a multi-segment boat trip with such a huge scope has meant learning a whole new set of skills. Notes Bob, "Ways of talking on the radio, dealing with traffic control, getting bridges open, finding marinas and anchorages after the hurricanes along the Gulf coast, passing tows, reading charts—all these things vary as we cruise from one region to another. And of course we have the bird books, wildlife books, and guide books we're flipping through too."

The DeGroots take full advantage of Marinalife services and association

memberships to aid them in their journey. "Marinalife has truly functioned as a concierge service during this undertaking," says Bob. "The Marinalife staff locates marinas that meet our criteria, makes reservations for us, and even handles our rental car and airplane reservations as needed. We also have reciprocal privileges at more than 800 member yacht clubs across the country, so that we can enjoy the clubs' amenities as we travel."

Kemba and Bob may have fast-paced careers, but they plan on taking their trip slowly, both literally and figuratively. Their typical cruising speed is a steady eight knots, and as Bob says, "It will take several years or a lifetime to travel the loop and take side trips to see the Caribbean, go through the canal, and then motor up the Inland Passage on the west coast." They want to take everything in—this is the trip of a lifetime, and they are in no rush. They've already decided that once they get settled into the routine of being full-time cruisers with full-time careers, they are going to start writing "dime novels." Much to their surprise and delight, they've discovered that there are ghost stories lurking in almost every town they visit. "With Kemba's medical background, and mine in forensic psychology and hypnotherapy," says Bob, "we thought we'd write ghost mystery stories. Every town has at least one. Kem and I have both published books, so we understand what it takes to do this well." Who knows what other twists their story may take, or what tales will unfold, as the DeGroots' grand adventure continues.

"Many of the ah-ha moments so far have come from our never-ending learning curve about the boat and navigating new waters and territories," says Bob. "Each waterway, river, anchorage, and marina that we encounter is a completely unique experience." **ml**