

# A Family AFFAIR

*A Yearlong Cruise Of The Great Loop, Including The Bahamas, Forges A Closer Relationship Between A Family That Traded Living Ashore For Exploring Afloat On A Krogen 48*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
MICHAEL SAMWAY



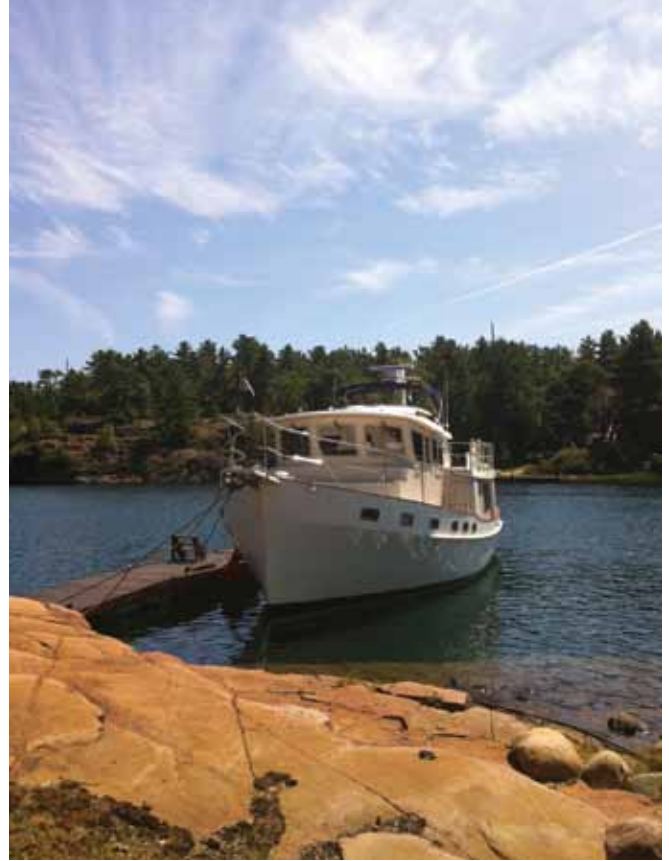
Photo By Keenan Samway

**Y**ou know the feeling when you're immersed in a book, lost in its adventure, captured by its characters, and sensing so clearly all the colors, sounds, smells, and shapes? You can't put down the book because you've become a silent observer of the story, maybe even a participant in the tale, and you're brimming with anticipation about what's unfolding. Some sections you race through without realizing you've devoured hundreds of pages; with other chapters, you savor the richness of description on every page, taking a deep breath after each, consumed by the language and its magic. That's a small taste of the feeling my wife, Jennifer; son, Keenan (13 years old); daughter, Daria (12 years old); and I had while on our yearlong family adventure through the Florida Keys, the Bahamas, and on the Great Loop. For the *Muddy Waters* crew, each day was a page or chapter in a captivating book.

Ever curious and inquisitive, we're not yet master mariners, but we've tried to become accomplished listeners and learners. We often said to one another on our trip that everyone has a story to tell. Everyone. This past year on the water, we made more time in our days to listen, observe, and appreciate. The people and their stories are out there for everyone to discover, but we seem to hurry too much through life on land, tugged to distraction by our responsibilities and omni-present devices, real or necessary as they are. Having traveled about 7,000 miles by water for a year at an average of 7.5 knots, we now see the land-life pace as akin to sprinting through an incredible bookstore, whirring past shelves of colorful and inviting novels, old and new.

At our meandering pace, we met people from all walks of life—rich, poor, and in between; of all races, religions, and ethnicities; those born on this very soil and those pulled here from other countries by the immense opportunity. We met veterans and active servicemen, mechanics, judges, farmers, plumbers, investors, teachers, a Hollywood actor, lockmasters, nurses, business owners, artists, a circus clown, river pilots, electricians, park rangers, librarians, fishermen, lawyers, mayors, and musicians. *Everyone* has a story. We listened and listened everywhere we went, and we learned so much from it. We met dozens of colorful characters, some worthy of a chapter in a book, if not an entire book unto themselves.

We met a retired Navy electrician from a WWII-era aircraft carrier, and he told us about the engineering of the internal telephone system for this floating city of more than 2,500 officers and seamen, and how he frequently had to navigate the byzantine maze of corridors and chases to keep communications inside the ship up and running on the high seas so the captain could issue orders, whether to the flight deck or to the engine room. He answered our questions about his first day aboard, a shakedown cruise in the winter waters of the Caribbean, and about the mess food. He recalled the chocolate chip cookies, baked 10,000 at a time. With a sparkle in his now watery blue eyes, he told us about proposing to his wife on the eve of embarking for the



*Left: Keenan and Daria in Charleston, South Carolina with a U.S. Navy WWII veteran and the USS Yorktown's war-time telephone engineer. Right: Muddy Waters at the Killarney Mountain Lodge in Canada's North Channel.*

Pacific. He recounted the date and the very park bench where he took a knee. He told us about his decision to join the ministry a decade ago, somewhere in his 80s he said, so he could work with kids. We four were honored to hear his story and other stories from other people we met on docks, in bookstores, in museums, in parks, and on other boats.

Listening to our kids ask questions, soak up the stories, and gather the context of the surrounding events, both personal and political, made us smile with quiet pride at what they absorbed and how they grew this year. And that was the story every day on our trip whether we visited a remote island, small town, or metropolis. Keenan and Daria spent hours and hours with fellow Loopers we met on the water at each port or anchorage. Loopers, like the sailors we met in the Bahamas, are a kind and warm crowd and were so willing to engage our kids and ask about living aboard—about their friends, hobbies, and favorite flavors of ice cream.

Now, about their onboard teachers: If you know a gifted teacher who inspires children, thank him or her, bring apples, and offer your support. Now that we've stepped inside the little red schoolhouse for 18 months to take on the roles as teachers, we further appreciate the need for the highest standards of excellence and opportunity in education. (See our February 19, 2011 post for more on our approach to homeschooling.) We might not have top-teacher chops aboard *Muddy Waters*, but we felt confident we were opening the lock doors to the grandest schoolhouse of all—a personal walk through history and through everyday life across America, Canada, and the Bahamas.

Since the waterways were the first—and early on, only—highways in America, the Bahamas, and Canada, we plied waters traveled by early explorers and yesterday's tow

captains, naval commanders, and rum runners. We visited fish camps, settlements, towns, cities, and more than one megalopolis. We spent hours on the solemn grounds of battlefields from the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. We toured the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis and the U.S. Military Academy in West Point and visited Presidential libraries. We saw places where locals were fighting decades of economic decline and places where business was thriving. We visited national parks, cruised in the open ocean, traversed 115 locks, saw swimming pigs and nesting bald eagles, plunged into waves a dozen feet high, and watched hundreds of serene sunrises and sunsets.

We read thousands of pages together on local history and the environment. We learned about spectacular blue holes in the Bahamas, Henry Flagler's drive to build a railroad to Key West, the winding beauty of Georgia's coastline, Fort Sumter on the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War, the history of the indigenous tribes of the Outer Banks, George Washington's role in conceiving of the Dismal Swamp, John Smith's awe sailing the estuary that is the Chesapeake, and approaching Ellis Island by water. We learned the Erie Canal—quickly supplanted by the railroad—was revolutionary in opening travel and trade from the vast Great Lakes region to the eastern seaboard and beyond.

We traveled with fellow Loopers to Ottawa and later explored the stunning waters of Canada's Georgian Bay. We climbed steep sand mountains at a place called Sleeping Bear Dunes and gazed upward in wonder on an architectural tour of the Chicago River. While on the Mississippi, we read Mark Twain's tales of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, experiencing the pulse of the heartland. We visited Shiloh and the site of the Battle Above

the Clouds. We cruised the lovely Panhandle and then enjoyed Florida's west coast and the Keys, both so close to our hearts and home.

Keenan and Daria have been avid readers for many moons, but their appetite on our journey grew like a building wave pushed by winds on open water. In addition to their schoolbooks and the items we had, the kids read about each park, battlefield, museum, or area we visited along the way. They read nearly 75 books on their own between the two of them. By the end of our journey, we began shedding ballast and donating books en masse. Jennifer and I are certain we visited every family-run bookshop on the Great Loop. We so enjoyed chatting with owners and patrons in those local shops, learning about local literature and often discovering secrets about the water too—favorite fishing holes, can't-miss anchorages, shoaling spots, cheap fuel depots, and creeks to kayak.

The kids also deepened their blossoming interests in their own hobbies. Keenan enjoyed photographing our surroundings from our topsides, and we've posted some of his favorite shots on our website. He's now learning more about the art and science of photography in a formal class in school. He also studied naval architecture thanks to materials and good guidance from the kind Kadey-Krogen team that expertly designed and built our sturdy and seaworthy North Sea trawler. Keenan also taught himself to play bass guitar and practiced regularly onboard *Muddy Waters*, taking a few lessons along the way from musicians we met.

Daria, who's danced with the Miami City Ballet for four years already, continued to follow up on her passion for the art—practicing regularly onboard and also dropping in on classes in studios in New York, Chicago, and other cities. She also made and sold jewelry, developing a fine creative eye, manual dexterity, and an entrepreneurial spirit. Daria was also able to take lessons and learn from local artists in their own studios.

Jennifer ran, biked, and swam throughout our journey. She entered a few local running races and trained hard for some multi-day and endurance trail races in which she competed in the weeks after our return. She even organized a kids' triathlon while we were at anchor nestled between dozens of sailors with kids onboard in the southern Exumas. As she always does, Jennifer made the best of our circumstances and surroundings—running on scenic trails, along riverbanks, on beaches, through cities, and used whatever she could find to develop creative strengthening exercises and obstacle courses. We took out our stand-up paddleboards regularly in the Bahamas, along the eastern seaboard of the United States and into Canada's pristine waters. Jennifer practiced yoga on our upper deck, always drawing the binocular-enhanced gaze of the tow captains. Ahoy! Eyes on the road there, cap'n! Don't run aground!

Jennifer also delved deeper into cooking and nutrition, reading more than a dozen books and scores of journal articles on the subject and making the galley the center of our watery home. See Jennifer's healthy recipe posts as



*Muddy Waters at anchor in Frying Pan Bay off Beausoleil Island National Park in the Georgian Bay.*



Top: Jennifer, Daria, and Keenan in Spanish Wells, Eleuthera. Right: Jennifer's footprints on Stocking Island, off the Exuma Sound, Bahamas.

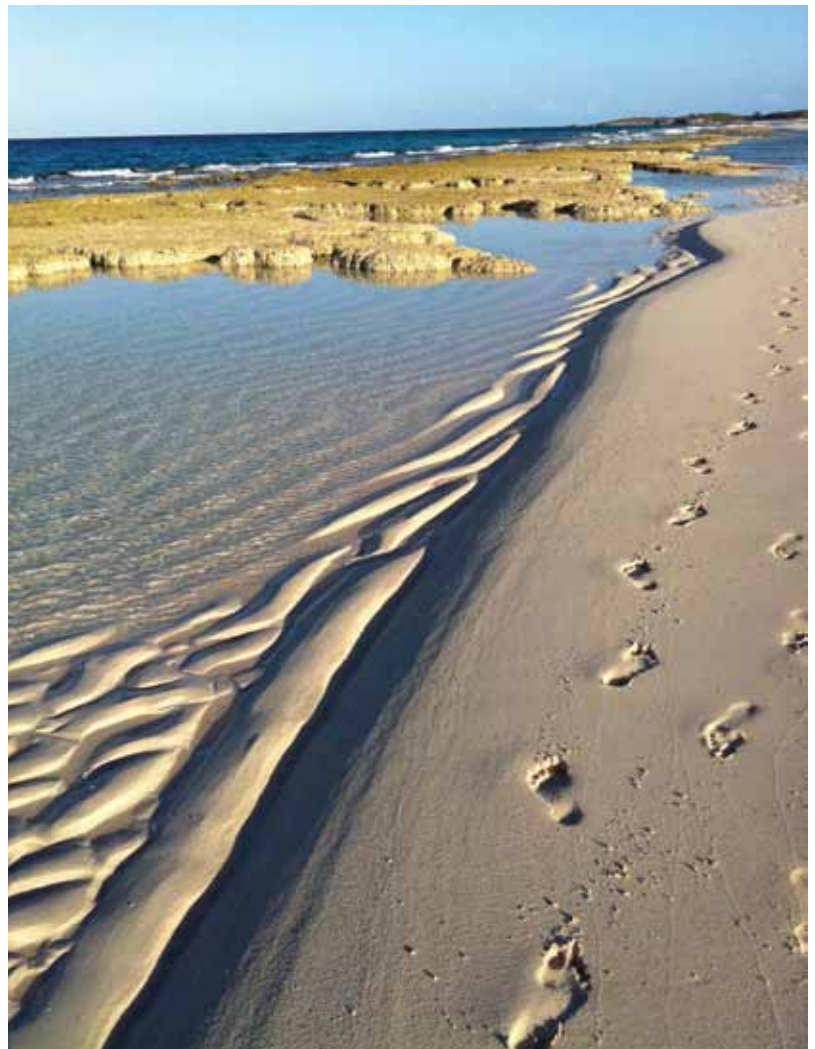
of life and fills you with satisfaction that you've experienced something that evokes feeling and emotion, of whatever type. For us, the book was exciting, mysterious, captivating, calming, and educational. Along the way the four of us learned seamanship, self-reliance, and an even deeper respect for nature, including its oceans, reefs, inlets, lakes, rivers, and canals. We completed our family journey with an indelible impression in our minds and hearts of the kindness, smarts, integrity, strength, and resilience of the Americans, Canadians, and Bahamians we met. Although it was something we knew beforehand, we were able to see it daily on the water together with the kids, appreciating the depth, sincerity, and power of those traits. You learn it best by experiencing it day in and day out.

Now, a year older, from our journey on the Great Loop, we feel a decade wiser. We're richer in knowledge, and most importantly we returned

well as her write-ups of places to dine and shop for healthy eats along the Great Loop. (Aye, methinks that be a recipe book in them pages for other buccaneers and sprogs alike on the Great Loop.) With Jennifer at the galley helm, we all learned heaping amounts about food and nutrition, and, best of all, we ate like kings. We shared three meals a day as a family almost every day of the trip. We talked travel, nature, politics, health, history, hopes, fears, friends, family, school. Our meals formed the core of our family experience in many ways since we'd give thanks for the food—mostly local—and for all that we have, and have experienced, as a family aboard *Muddy Waters*.

As for the captain (me) and my hobbies, I was mostly focused on keeping the good ship *Muddy Waters* afloat, mechanically operational and pointed in the right direction. I cherished each moment of it—whether I was navigating, swabbing the decks, or doing mechanical maintenance. I was also able to spend time on music—playing guitar and harmonica, writing a handful of songs, listening to and learning even more about the blues. Meaningful to the captain and occasionally entertaining for the crew, music was a constant on the water.

The outdoors was often our family classroom and our place for exercise, and we blended the two on most days. Our days were full. Full in the way a good book is full






*The Samway family on the Great Loop in the San Sebastian River, St. Augustine, Florida.*

chock-full of lasting memories of people, places, and shared events. Jennifer and I often said to the kids that this was a year in which afterward, we could walk through each day and recount our adventures, the places, and the people. Our logbook and blog will help in that way—the experience we had was so extraordinary. The stories are so much a part of us and we hope to call up the daily images for a lifetime.

Though we planned for a decade, saved our pennies, absorbed as much knowledge as we could from others more experienced than us, and sailed whenever we could in our home waters and in the Bahamas, we recognize our good fortune in being able to make this family adventure a reality at our age and with our kids in tow. We were driven by a thirst for adventure and exploration, a hunger for knowledge and experience, a willingness to be a bit unconventional and leave a career mid-stream, and then we added a sprinkle of hard work and, most importantly, a huge helping of luck. Sailors are superstitious souls and we know most of it really was luck, plain and simple.

We also owe thanks to our families and friends who over the years believed with us (and in us) in the idea of a Samway Adventure—whether it involved sailing in the

Caribbean, adventure racing in Central America, mountain climbing in the Andes, whitewater rafting in Maine, or canoeing on the Amazon with our kids—and who supported our dreams about this next journey at sea. We're grateful for the visits from family and friends in ports across America, Canada, and the Bahamas. Sharing the adventure with others made the story richer for us. We wrote a blog titled, "Thank You" on March 12, 2011, and we have so many new friends to add to the list and so many fine sailors who gave us good guidance and warm companionship along the way. Thank you.

Like finishing a good book, we sighed as we sailed through a closing chapter on the Samway Adventure—exhaling and closing our eyes to think about the miles we traveled as a family. We're nourished by what we learned and all we experienced along the way. We're even ready to pick up the next book to see what adventure might be in store for the four of us. 

---

*The Samways recently cruised up the East Coast to New England. You can follow their travels aboard Muddy Waters at [www.samwayadventure.com](http://www.samwayadventure.com).*