

Secret Getaway

Explore the exquisite, oft-overlooked
charter grounds of Southwest Florida.

BY CHRIS CASWELL

The conversation between my wife, She Who Must Be Obeyed, and I went something like this:

SWMBO: "Do you think he's standing there?"

Me: "The chart says there's plenty of water where he's standing."

SWMBO: "That may be, but I don't think that bird has legs five feet long!"



WE WERE A COUPLE OF DAYS into a most delightful bareboat charter on Florida's West Coast, and we'd already learned two things: Pay attention to the charts and stay away from areas where birds are standing.

We were exploring the waters out of Fort Myers, Florida, aboard one of the charter yachts from Southwest Florida Yachts (SWFY), and it was absolutely spectacular. The west coast of Florida is one of those secret cruising grounds that are overlooked because they are just so darn convenient. No passports, no foreign airports, no hassles with provisions and, though you're in the Deep South, not too much of a language barrier.

If you automatically think of Caribbean islands or South Pacific atolls when you say the words "bareboat charters," well, you're really missing out. Imagine sandy beaches littered with beautiful shells, quiet anchorages and great marinas. And, whether your tastes run toward pub-hopping until the wee hours or finding a beach with no footprints except your own, there's something for everyone.

If you're accustomed to bareboat chartering in the Caribbean, this is a

different animal. First, there are no fleets of cookie-cutter, look-alike boats. Southwest Florida Yachts has an eclectic fleet of privately owned yachts, which they manage in their charter program. In their power fleet, these range from a 28-foot Albin day cruiser through several Grand Banks of various sizes, to Mainships.

Our choice was a Mainship 43 named *And Everywhere*, after the Beatles 1966 hit, "Here, There, and Everywhere," which, in fact, became the perfect description for our charter voyage. With two private staterooms (each with ensuite heads and showers) and a sleeper sofa, it's perfect for two couples plus kids.

SWFY has a great policy that allows charterers to spend the night before their charter begins aboard their chosen boat. Not only does that save the cost of a hotel room, but it also allows time to unpack, get checked out on the boat and do a little last-minute provisioning at a nearby Publix.

If you've chartered a few times, you know that charter companies can vary widely, both in their offerings and in the level of maintenance. Vic and Barb Hansen have owned SWFY for more than 20 years, and believe me, they run a tight ship. Before a boat even gets into their fleet, it first has to pass a thorough survey; then it has

to be equipped to a high standard to meet the Hansen's requirements.

In the case of *And Everywhere*, that meant all the expected items, from towels and bedding to local charts and guidebooks. But our yacht also had such niceties as a new propane barbecue, an Avon RIB on a hydraulic platform, a fiberglass hardtop for sun protection, and a suite of Raymarine electronics that included chartplotter and radar. I appreciated the 44-pound Bruce anchor (perfect for these waters) on a Lewmar windlass with 100 feet of chain rode. Since Florida nights can sometimes be steamy (and buggy), our crew enjoyed three-zone MarineAir A/C, and SWMBO was happy in her fully-equipped, all-electric galley. This was a swell ship, not a hell ship.

Getting Underway

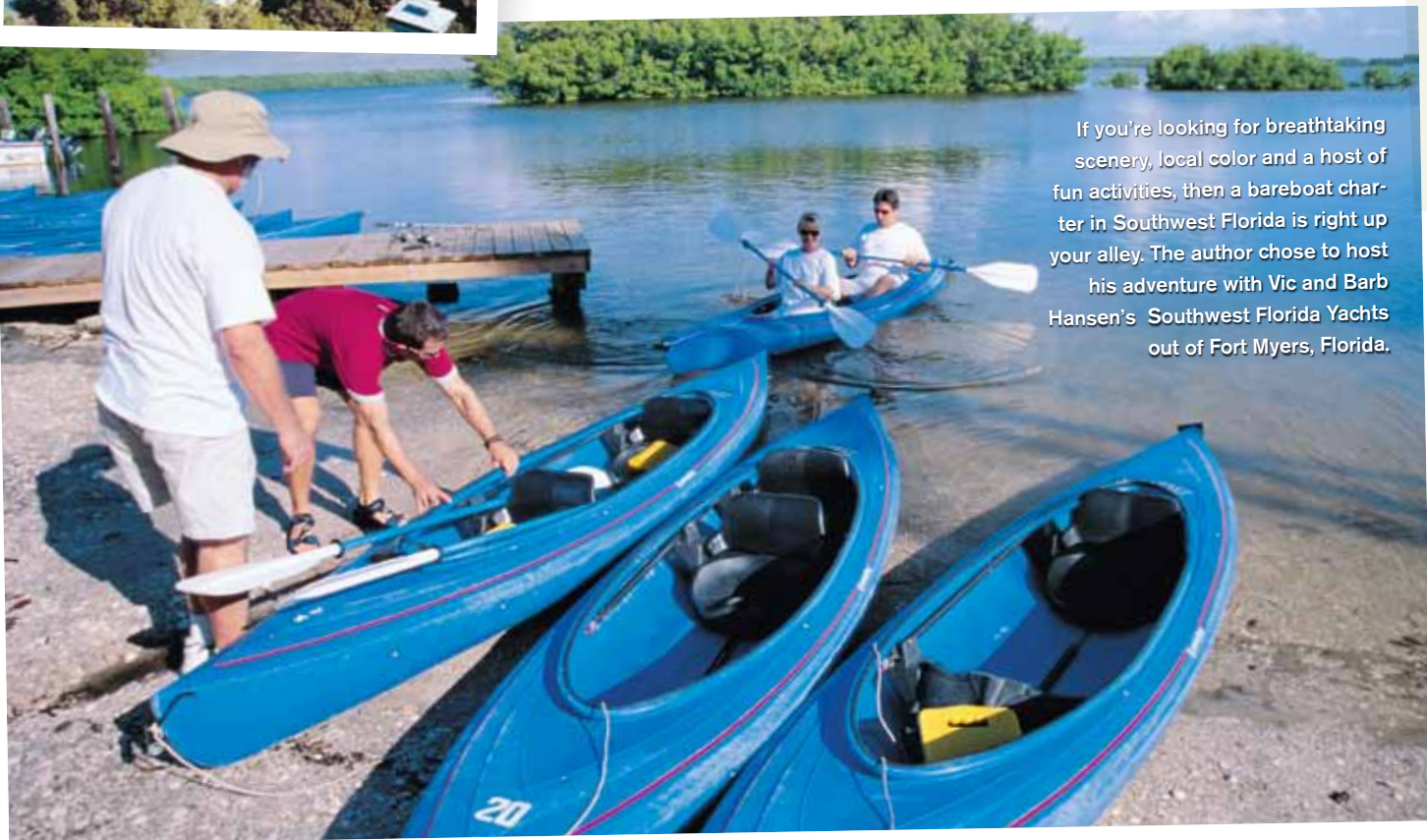
Our Mainship was in absolutely pristine condition when we arrived, and our check-out covered everything from how to launch the tender to where to find the best cheeseburgers. I have to admit: I was impressed by several file boxes neatly indexed with the manuals for every piece of equipment on board.

SWFY has two charter bases, but they keep their power fleet in Fort Myers on the Caloosahatchee River, which locals shorten to "The River" for obvious reasons. Convenient to major airports and highways, this is about 10 miles upstream from the start of the cruising grounds of southwest Florida.

Charterers need venture no further than the very doorstep of Fort Myers and, once off the river, you enter Pine Island Sound, a cruising wonderland. About 15 miles long and four miles wide, the Sound is protected by the barrier islands of Sanibel and Captiva from the Gulf of Mexico. You could spend a delightful week without ever leaving Pine Island Sound, sampling a different anchorage or marina every evening, hunting for shells or simply floating in bathtub-warm water gazing at the cerulean sky.

We dawdled on the Caloosahatchee, looking at the sprawling homes that were once winter retreats for the likes of Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. We weren't hurried for a couple of reasons. First, unlike the Caribbean, we weren't racing to get a decent anchorage in a crowded harbor. There are more than enough coves and marinas to go around. And second, I was acquainting myself with the chartplotter and depth sounder.

Because, you see, these are thin waters. Vic Hansen's motto for charterers is: "White is all



If you're looking for breathtaking scenery, local color and a host of fun activities, then a bareboat charter in Southwest Florida is right up your alley. The author chose to host his adventure with Vic and Barb Hansen's Southwest Florida Yachts out of Fort Myers, Florida.



Picnic Key (pictured at left) is well protected from prevailing breezes and is a great stop for the afternoon. The author had a swell time exploring the area aboard a well-maintained Mainship 43 from Southwest Florida Yachts (bottom).



'Tween Waters Island Resort (top) is a beautiful place to kick back, relax and catch up on some shell collecting. Cabbage Key bar boasts "the most expensive wallpaper in the world." Some say between \$40,000 and \$60,000 litter the bar walls (bottom).



right, blue review." Look at your chart, and you'll see that deeper water is shown in white, while shallow water is blue. If you're planning to tiptoe into the blue zones (which you will), review the chart beforehand. Carefully.

Our sounder didn't read much over 10 feet for most of our trip. We did slide through a few skinny water places where I could clearly see the bottom with my Polaroid sunglasses, but we never touched. According to the Hansens, even an occasional touch is rarely a problem because the bottom is generally soft mud or sand.

You also must pay attention to the buoys, even with your chartplotter, because they don't make sense to those of us used to "red-right-returning." In this case, the mnemonic is "red-right-returning-to-Texas" because you're cruising on the Intracoastal Waterway, which has its own buoyage rules.

Weaving our way through fleets of anglers drift-fishing in small boats (and supplied with beer and bait by an entrepreneur aboard a pontoon boat shop), we

stopped for a lazy lunch at the perfectly named Picnic Island, which is well protected from the prevailing breezes.

Our first night was spent in the marina at the Sanibel Harbour Resort, a luxury resort recently acquired and upgraded by Marriott. We'd stayed at the resort on several occasions, since boatbuilders often use the marina for new model debuts, and found the marina was quiet and friendly. Even the skipper of the hotel's dinner cruise yacht checked in later to make sure we were comfortably settled.

The next day we headed northwards along the Intracoastal (towards Texas) and had our first encounter with the wild dolphin on Pine Island Sound, which amused themselves (and us) by playing in our bow and stern waves. Talking to other skippers, it seems that the dolphin simply love boats, and nearly everyone on these waters has several encounters with them.

The electric anchor windlass was worth its weight when we dropped a lunch hook at Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island, which is home to more than 200 species of birds, including the Bald Eagle.

At Tween Waters Island Resort, we picked up a transient slip at the low key marina and, true to its name, we could literally walk across the narrow isthmus to hunt for shells on

the long sandy ocean beach. Sanibel and Captiva islands are, of course, legendary worldwide for being repositories of shells, and we added many to our collection. That evening we were treated to a spectacular lightning display, and we tucked into our bunks with rain thundering on the decks. But the next morning, as always, was bright, warm and freshly washed.

Nearby South Seas Island Resort is at the tip of Captiva, and it was rebuilt and upgraded after being decimated by Hurricane Charley. Today, it has a glossy marina, cute shops and a huge waterpark for the kids.

Venturing on, we tucked in to Cabbage Key, a private resort known for the cheeseburger that allegedly inspired Jimmy Buffett to write "Cheeseburger In Paradise." Dubious as that distinction may be, if only because several dozen restaurants also claim that title, the fact is that their cheeseburger is well worth a visit: "Heaven on earth with an onion slice!"

Built in the 1930s as the home of mystery writer Mary Roberts Rinehart, Cabbage Key has another notable claim: The most expensive wallpaper in the world. The Cabbage Key bar, with its original hardwood floors and fireplace,



Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island is home to more than 200 species of birds, not to mention the abundance of wildlife inhabiting the region.

Things To Know Before You Go

- **Rates:** Our Mainship 43 charters for five days at between \$3,030 and \$3,789, depending on the season. A security deposit of \$2,500 covers the deductible for the provided insurance and is refunded promptly if no charges are incurred. Grand Banks 42s are the same rate.
- **Fuel:** We didn't run hard or use the generator at night, so we used less than 50 gallons of diesel, which, with the required holding tank pump-out before returning the yacht, came to less than \$200.
- **Provisions:** Almost too easy. A Publix supermarket with everything you could possibly want is just down the street from the SWFY office, and many of the marinas also are close to markets for restocking during your trip.
- **Don't Forget:** Two swimsuits (so one can dry), lots of sunscreen and a good hat, Polaroid sunglasses for navigating, cameras to capture the wildlife and scenery, and tiny umbrellas to put in your piña coladas as you toast a most wonderful charter. — C.C.



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is literally papered with thousands of autographed one-dollar bills. Guestimates place the value at between \$40,000 and \$60,000 but, hey, who's counting. The owners gather up loose and falling bills and, when they reach \$10,000, donate them to charity. A nice touch.

Nearby Useppa Island is a private island club (no cars — golf carts only), but with a great marina that is available to SWFY charterers, since the Hansens are members. Not far away is Pelican Bay, a delightful anchorage at the tip of Cayo Costa that's a favorite among cruising skippers.

Further north is Charlotte Harbor and Gasparilla Sound, both with appealing anchorages and sites to explore, but we'll save them for our next adventure with Southwest Florida Yachts.

It had been a delightful charter, made possible because of a good yacht, an attentive charter company and a wonderful cruising area.

Next time, I'm going to bring along a birdwatching guidebook, so I'll know which ones have really long legs. ♦



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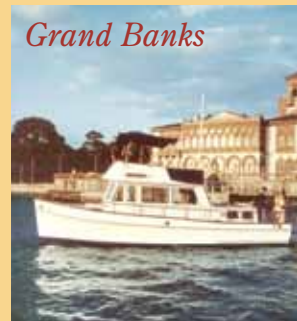
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