

Key West photo feature: dazzling water, pedal-down sailing

Sailing

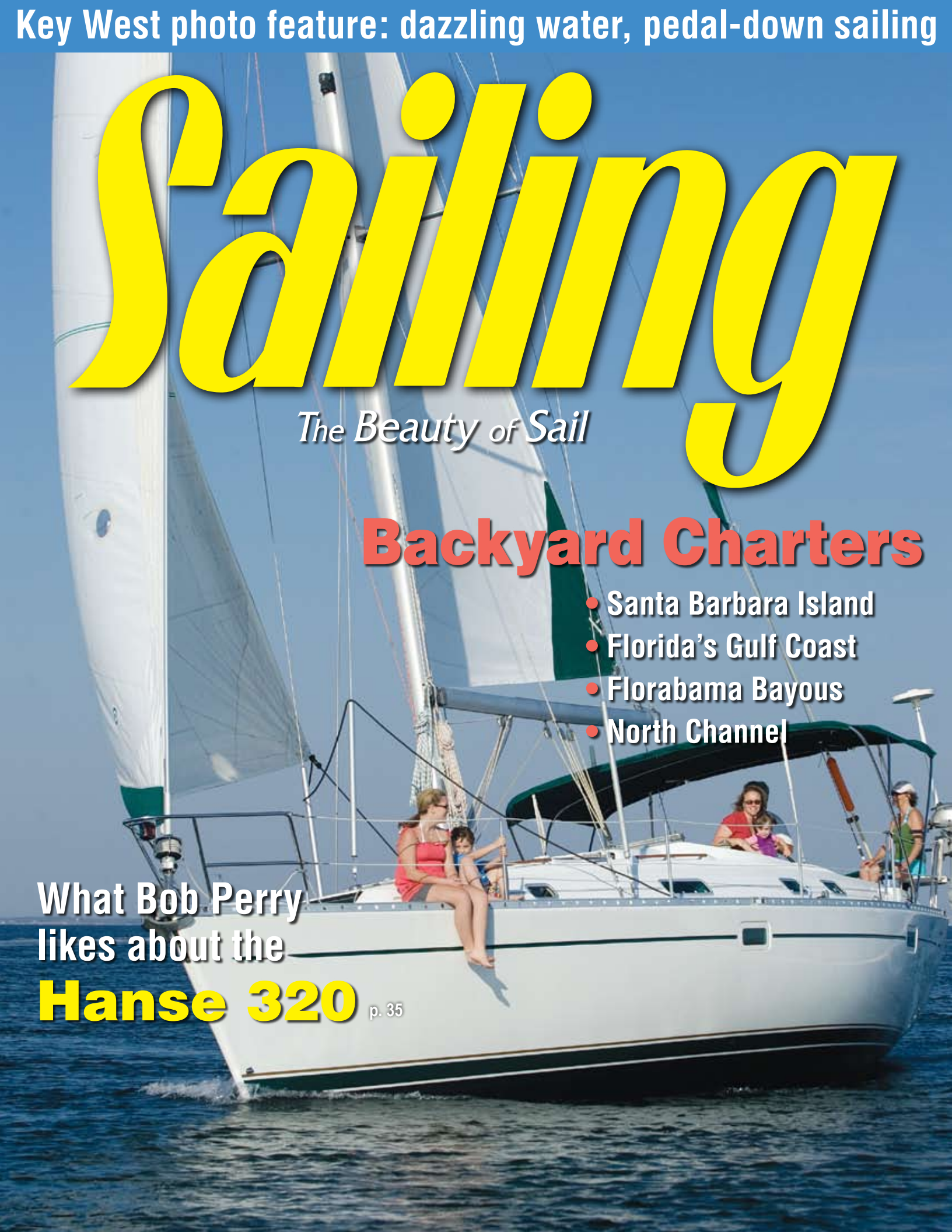
The Beauty of Sail

Backyard Charters

- Santa Barbara Island
- Florida's Gulf Coast
- Florabama Bayous
- North Channel

What Bob Perry
likes about the

Hanse 320 p. 35





Wish you were here? A Marshall catboat moors off Useppa Island on Florida's Gulf Coast. Joyce Black tends the helm of the chartered Island Packet 32 *Argo II* on a downwind sail amongst the barrier islands, above right.

On a charter in Florida's Fort Myers area, Joyce and Billy Black negotiate the sometimes baffling but always rewarding channels of the barrier islands



A cruise in Manatee Waters

By Joyce Black with photography by Billy Black

It was with a look of mild alarm that the man behind me at the warehouse superstore stepped into another line when my cell phone went off in my pocket sounding a bit like intestinal distress. It's actually the only animal call ring tone available from my provider: migrating whales. I love animals, wild and domestic, and had added the whales to my life during the middle of a New England winter when the neighborhood opossums, skunks and coyotes were laying low. Another solution to the animal shortage, and to shed some of your own winter coats, is to travel south to the Fort Myers, Florida, area and charter a boat for a week or longer.

Vic and Barb Hansen of Southwest Florida Yachts have been renting boats to charterers

and helping them get the most out of the area for more than 20 years. They run a multilayered operation, brokering boats to buyers and then chartering them to folks like you and me when not being used by their owners. They also operate a sailing and powerboating school for anyone who needs more confidence before taking a boat out on their own.

They set us up with a 32-footer called *Argo II*, an Island Packet of a certain age but spacious and comfortable. The Hansens' office is in Fort Myers but most of the boats are based north of town on Charlotte Harbor at the Burnt Store Marina, the largest marina on the west coast of Florida. Another charter company with dock space at Burnt Store, Yachting Vacations, offers sailboats exclusively and has

several Island Packets, an Etap and the new Catalina 320 Mk II in their fleet. They also offer basic and advanced sailing classes.

The marina docks are part of a thriving development that encircles condos, apartments and private homes. While we were provisioning our boat and setting it up for the week we'd spend exploring, my husband Billy Black admired all the outdoor activities we could see from the dock. There were lots of dog walkers, joggers and one woman, definitely under 60, we noticed because she was so enjoying her bright pink bike. She went round and round the path while we were stowing our groceries, singing enthusiastically along with something on her iPod. Billy, 51, turned to me and declared, "I want to be just like that when I get old."



For me, the problem with getting our tasks accomplished was the manatee family in the corner of the marina, directly in the path between the parking lot and our boat. Six or seven large, scuffed-up, lumpy creatures, more than I'd ever seen in one place, were lounging in the relatively clear water, diving and surfacing with a huge gasp, eating and showing off two adorable little manatee children. Billy took a cart of provisions to the boat, waited for me to follow, and finally had to come get me. I took the cart back up to the parking lot, and once again Billy had to gather me in. He let me go back and admire them in the morning before SWFY General Manager, Marc Winkel, gave us his excellent briefing about our cruising options.

Channel sailing

Here's where we experienced the real beauty of the base at Burnt Store Marina: You head out of the inlet and directly into Charlotte Harbor. The water is shallow but knit together by a wealth of well traveled, well marked channels between islands that range from protected parkland to tourist oases. Billy is a brave and adventurous man, so of course we had to poke our nose out Boca Grande Pass into the Gulf of Mexico. He was looking for a good sail but we agreed it was both prudent and

more interesting to take Marc's advice and go straight to Cayo Costa State Park.

While we had taken *Argo II* out during Easter week we still found plenty of space to



anchor in a harbor so protected that lots of not very appealing vegetation floated around the boat. It was greenish-brown and fuzzy, and not something I wanted to swim in, but the island had a wide, clean white beach and a dock to land the dingy.

A ferry runs to the island from Pine Island and though we saw no dinghies but our own, there were six or seven families camping. Facilities include bike rentals, picnic tables and educational kiosks that tell about the plants and wildlife. They explained the mystery of all the dead trees. Florida officials are trying to eradicate the invasive Australian pine and learned from a previous bad experience to leave the dead trees standing until native species take over the job of retaining the soil. The acres of giant, white skeletons



A young boy helps his little sister get a better view from the Boca Grande Lighthouse Museum, above. Joyce spots the channels from the bow of *Argo II*, left.

are unsightly, but are a symbol of smart people solving a big problem.

Fishing is one of the attractions on Cayo Costa and if you charter from Southwest you will need to bring your own gear and have a license, which you can buy online or at one of the local bait and tackle stores. As we traveled around this part of Florida it became obvious that fishing was more than a hobby for a great many of the people we met on the water; it is their reason for living. We also heard that winter shelling is fruitful on the south end of the island.

The next day we stuck our nose out into the Gulf again, but our ultimate destination

was Useppa Island where we were meeting Barb and Vic for dinner, so we turned around and made a circumnavigation of Useppa instead. Sailing by Punta Blanca Island, we saw some animals on shore that I first took to be a group of dogs, but when I pointed the binoculars on them it turned out to be a herd of black feral pigs. I longed to make their acquaintance, or at least see them up close, but the channel did not oblige.

On our sail around Useppa we passed the Dollar Bar at Cabbage Key, a very popular stop for boaters. It may be one of Jimmy Buffett's inspirations for his cheeseburger song, but we had lots of fresh food onboard and anchoring in the clear water just off the channel and going for a swim seemed like a better idea.

Useppa is a private island, very exclusive, and from some of the signs posted over residents' garages, unapologetically Republican. The dockmaster and reception crew were all very friendly and helpful, and the Hansens' membership in the Useppa Island Club extends to their charter customers.

There is a nice little museum that tells how the island has been continuously inhabited for 10,000 years, very successfully, and for a long time by the

Calusa Indians. The museum gift shop has lots of books on the area, including a guide to a walking tour of Useppa. I loved learning the variety of trees and other plants on our walk (numbered for my convenience) and how the area had recovered from Hurricane Charlie in 2004. There are no cars on Useppa, but most of the residents have put some energy into customizing their golf carts. We saw a Hummer cart, a Rolls Royce cart and one with fins, circa 1957. Vic Hansen's was the only one we saw with a wind vane.

Hurricane Charlie ran right over the Collier Inn, where we met the Hansens for dinner that evening, but it had been not only



Anchored in the glassy calm water off Cayo Costa State Park, swinging in the hammock is the perfect way to while away the late afternoon hours.

restored, but as often happens, improved. We met in the bar, a room decorated in the "Old Florida" style we saw all over the island. The walls were covered with fishing trophies and photographs and there were cases and cases of tarpon scales. Tarpon tournaments are still a big draw to the Fort Myers area and have been for decades. The winner of each tournament was commemorated with a scale pulled from the fish they caught and a plaque telling the name of the fisherman and the measurements of the fish.

Island hopping

The next morning we set out to make a passage to Tween Waters, the narrow strip of land on Captiva Island that separates the Gulf of Mexico from Pine Island Sound. The challenge in planning a sail in this area is that almost all your travel has to happen in narrow designated channels. The channels are full of powerboats going both directions, some of them surprisingly large considering the depth in the middle of the channel was often just five or six feet.

On this passage we got lucky with a sporty downwind sail through the

Roosevelt Channel. The wind was blowing 12 to 18 knots and we made it to the anchorage in three hours. Vic had gone over the chart with us before we left Useppa but the end of the channel where we anchored was still a surprise. It was clearly marked all the way to where the water was two feet in the channel, and out of the channel it was one.

We checked the chart again before we committed to staying the night since this spot didn't give us much protection from the wind, but decided that we didn't know enough about our options to find another harbor at that hour. We were a little worried about the swinging room in the narrow alley but Billy

is a master in the art of anchoring. In the end we were comfortable enough to leave the boat and take the dinghy to shore for a walk and a look around.

It appeared that sunset was the big event of the day. When we arrived on the Gulf side of the beach it was packed with people from the many motels and apartments. Children



Hurricane-damaged boats cling to life and the mangrove trees off Tween Waters, top, while Barb Hansen of Southwest Florida Yachts gives a lift to some friends on her golf cart, the preferred mode of transportation on islands that are off limits to cars, above left. A flock of brown pelicans gather on what is evidently one of their favorite roosting rocks, above right.

ran up and down on the white sand, lots of people were relaxing on beach chairs with a beverage and a few folks were casting into the surf. The minute the sun went down they evacuated en masse, hauling chairs, children and fishing poles. We walked into town and discovered that Tween Waters is a very popular Easter-weekend destination. There were several attractive restaurants but we didn't feel like waiting for dinner so we settled for a burger in a hotel dining room.

Our little inflatable dinghy, appropriately named *Achilles Heel*, made it back to the boat, though it required some tacking back and forth to make it upwind, and by now we were

getting the hang of its peculiarities. Rather than a reverse gear, the system with the little outboard (painted over so many times we were never able to discover its pedigree) was to flip the motor around very quickly when you wanted to back up.

The next morning we left early for Boca Grande and were happy as we headed out into

the main channel that the dinghy and motor were not more substantial. Billy saw that it would be a disaster to try to tow it in the freshening breeze so we pulled it up on deck. At first it seemed we'd gotten lucky again with the wind angle but we just couldn't power through the chop, so we motorsailed for a couple of hours to the well-marked entrance to Boca Grande's very protected harbor.

Boca Grande Marina Manager Garrett Lown and Dock Master Aaron Sutcliffe made us wish we'd come right there from Useppa. They welcomed us to a dock that looked like new, gave us a key to the clean showers and rented us a zippy golf cart.

Boca Grande is in the southern third of Gasparilla Island, attached now by a causeway to the rest of

Florida, but the island attitude endures. A golf cart or a bike easily gets you anywhere on the island and we took ours up a dedicated cart road all the way to the northern tip. Looking down on another marina that was catching some fetch made us happy we were docked where we were. On our way back we stopped at the Boca Grande lighthouse and museum. More dioramas and artifacts from the Calusa Indians but also a great view of the beach, packed with folks turning red and sandy, and a lovely older gentleman who'd come down from Georgia with four generations of his family. He was standing on the beach in a 10-gallon hat and his stocking feet.

The town of Boca Grande took a big hit from Charlie but appears to have completely recovered without losing its Old Florida charm. There is still an independent hardware store, a sports outfitter and a couple of diners among the boutiques and gourmet delis. We asked anyone we encountered about a good bet for dinner though our marina had an elegant new restaurant, the Eagle Grill, just opened after a big refit. It seemed a little fancy for us that evening.

We settled on the Pink Elephant, recommended by the woman who sold us our picnic lunch. They easily fit us in, even on this busy weekend, and we had a couple of fresh and

interesting seafood dishes in the downstairs bar. As we zipped back to *Argo II* in our golf cart under the overhanging banyans, we wished that travel on Aquidneck Island, where we live, were so civilized.

The next morning we headed back to the base. Although we'd heard intriguing things about Punta Gorda and the north end of Charlotte Harbor, we decided to save that for another day. The breeze was still fresh and on this passage it wasn't so important to stay in the channels, so we were able to tack toward the tall apartment buildings at Burnt Store, an excellent landmark. Unfortunately we decided after a few tacks it was an excellent landmark that we were

not moving closer to fast enough, so we rolled up the jib and motored back to the dock.

The manatees came back the next day as we were taking our stuff off the boat, and if anyone wants to offer Sprint a ring tone with that gasping, sucking sound they make when coming up for air, I'm your first customer. ☐

*For information on chartering in this location, contact **Southwest Florida Yachts, Inc., Florida Sailing & Cruising School**, 3444 Marinetown Lane N.W., Suite 19, North Fort Myers, FL 33903, (239) 656-1339 or (800) 262-7939, Fax (239) 656-2628 www.swfyachts.com, www.flsailandcruiseschool.com, www.swfyachtsales.com, info@swfyachts.com.*



Visitors enjoy a day at the beach at Boca Grande.