

# An alternative to ownership

By Bruce Ellen

My wife, Margaret, and I have owned three sailboats and two powerboats, and we'll be chartering a powerboat for the 11th time this fall. We vote for chartering.

It's much cheaper, and we don't have to worry about maintenance. Or pay for a slip when we're not cruising. Or feel guilty about not using the boat enough. Or spend \$3 a gallon on fuel to get the boat from Georgia, where we live, to Florida, where we cruise.



**Bruce Ellen keeps watch with dog Taylor close under foot.**

The charter boat is in Florida. We just drive down, pick it up and go.

I grew up in Savannah, Ga. My father didn't hunt or fish. He played golf, flew an airplane and owned a boat. The acorn doesn't fall too far from the tree. I gravitated toward golfing, flying and boating. My first boat was a 14-foot plywood bateau with a 1954 4-hp Champion motor. I used it to cruise the rivers between Savannah and Hilton Head, S.C. I flew a C-130 for the Air Force in Vietnam, flew commercially for a while and then went to work for Georgia Pacific. I wound up in Augusta, close to 70,000-acre Lake Strom Thurman, the largest lake in Georgia. It's quite a good boating lake.

The first boat Margaret and I bought was a 23-foot sailboat. We spent a night on it and realized very quickly that it was too small, so we traded it on a 30-foot Catalina. Then we realized there wasn't enough wind on Lake Thurman to sail it, at least not on weekends. It was our impression that the winds blew strong during the week but were never strong enough on the weekends, when we could use the boat. And the kids didn't enjoy it. Not enough room. Margaret said when she went below it felt like a submarine.

So we had visions of buying a powerboat. I started reading *PassageMaker* magazine. We read Robert Beebe's "Voyaging Under Power." We felt like this would be something we wanted to do. So in 1995 Margaret and I and the kids — Elizabeth and Parker — chartered a 36-foot Grand Banks trawler from Southwest Florida Yachts in North

Fort Myers, Fla. About an hour out of Marina-town Marina, I happened to turn around and look at Margaret. I remember this so clearly: She gave me this big, smiling thumbs up.

We love cruising around Sanibel and Captiva. The tide is just 1-1/2 feet or so; the water is beautiful; the beaches are white sand; dolphins swim alongside the boat; and there are lots of birds. It's pretty, and you don't have to cruise far between marinas.

We really enjoyed that charter and thought we'd like to do it again on a larger vessel. So we chartered a Grand Banks 42. It was great. Southwest Florida Yachts stocked everything we needed on the boat, right down to a flashlight and spare parts. All we had to bring was our clothes, our booze and our food. (Food could have been provided too, if we had wanted.) And its boats are superbly maintained.

Over the next 10 years we did 10 power charters, always looking for the perfect boat to buy and call our own. We signed on with the Marine Trawler Owner's Association so we could get first-hand information about cruising on pleasure trawlers. It was clear trawler owners really love their boats, even though they aren't the fastest boats and aren't always the most comfortably appointed either.

Margaret and I had gone to the Miami International Boat Show in 1996 and found the boat we thought we would want when the time came: a Bayliner 4788 pilothouse motoryacht. We kept chartering, mostly with Southwest Florida Yachts. They are the only outfit I know that lets you take your pet along. We always brought Franz, our miniature schnauzer. Then our situation changed. My father died; he had been with us on four or five charters. Our daughter got married and moved away. Franz died. In February 2004, we bought the Bayliner we had had our eye on all those years and named it Empty Nest.

In two years, we put 270 hours and 3,000 miles on her. Our big cruise was from Myrtle

Beach, S.C., to Stuart, Fla., then across the Sunshine State via Lake Okeechobee to Fort Myers. We spent a month in Fort Myers before heading back. On the way back to Myrtle Beach we got to thinking about the real cost of owning a boat. The slip's \$700 or \$800 a month; insurance is \$4,000. Depreciation is \$20,000-plus, and that's a real cost when you sell. Plus, there's the interest you're paying on your money, another \$20,000 a year. And the cost of maintenance. We figured that two years of boat ownership, with fuel and marinas along the way, cost us about \$145,000. You can do a lot of chartering for that kind of money.

We sold the Bayliner, though I had no problem at all with the boat. It was well-appointed and very comfortable. But we did get to the point where we felt that instead of us owning the boat, it owned us. We felt like we should go down to the lake every other week or so to check on the boat. It was expensive, both in money and time.

Now my daughter is living in Florida, and, of course, we've got to see her and our beautiful grandchild. So we're back in chartering mode. We can drive to Florida in 10 hours; it takes 10 days by boat. We called Southwest Florida Yachts and reserved the 42-foot Jefferson motoryacht, Final Sea-lection, for nine days in October. With the summer special it'll cost \$3,000, and when we're through we'll just give them the keys and come home. No fuss. No muss. We vote for chartering.

*Bruce Ellen, 66, is a retired plant manager with Georgia Pacific. He and his wife, Margaret, 55, live in Augusta, Ga., where Bruce plays golf four or five times a week. He and Margaret like to take a break from the links and charter on Florida's west coast, where they visit their daughter Elizabeth, her husband and 18-month-old granddaughter.*