

The ABA Beacon

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Boating Destinations

Cruising the Intracoastal Waterway - First of a Three-Part Series

by W. Lynn Seldon, Jr. - Boating and Travel Writer

For boaters, few passages have the allure of the famed Intracoastal Waterway. Called the ICW, the Inland Waterway, or simply the "Ditch," the Intracoastal provides one of the finest inland boating experiences in the world.

With generally protected water, ease of navigation, and breadth of services, the ICW is simply a great place to boat. Whether you just want a quick outing or plan to boat the entire length, the ICW is certainly an inviting destination for boaters of all experience and skill levels.



Photo by W. Lynn Seldon, Jr.

ICW at Great Bridge, VA

cruising some narrow, shallow, and busy channel with lots of opening bridges can be a bit disconcerting. It doesn't help that the chartbooks reveal places like the Dismal Swamp, Mosquito Lagoon, Alligator River, and Cape Fear River.

But boaters need not

fear the ICW. It's generally no more narrow, shallow, or busy than other boating areas and, once there, boaters usually find ideal conditions. As for the bridges, there are only 85 opening bridges between Norfolk and Miami, with many of them concentrated in South Florida.

Other concerns include a lack of overnight facilities and services; tidal changes and currents; and bad weather. On average, boaters find a marina or anchorage every 25 miles or less, making planning easy. There are definitely tidal changes (up to nine feet in spots), as well as some strong currents, but they typically are something that a skilled and strong hand at the helm can handle.

These good cruising conditions are enhanced by a climate that ranges from temperate to subtropical. Of course, it can get quite hot in the summer and cool in the winter, but the ICW is enjoyable year-round. When bad weather does approach, it's usually easy to find a place to run to for shelter.

Given all of this, boaters will encounter no more problems than they would on any other body of water. As with boating everywhere, good judgement, the ability to read a chart, and a

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What is the Intracoastal Waterway?

Answering that question is perhaps harder than learning to tie all of those boating knots. Officially, the Intracoastal Waterway starts at the Annisquam River north of Boston and runs down the East Coast and across the Gulf of Mexico coastline to Brownsville, Texas.

But what most people mean (including the authors of cruising guides and chartbooks) when they refer to the ICW is the section between Norfolk, Virginia, and Miami, Florida. In fact, Norfolk Harbor marks Mile Zero (0) of the ICW, while Miami's final mark is Mile 1,095.0.

What to Expect

The ICW from Norfolk to Miami is generally a protected inside passage. Many *Beacon* readers' homeports are on larger open bodies of water in the Northeast, the Great Lakes, and along the Gulf of Mexico. Thus, the idea of

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properly equipped boat are all prerequisites.

Planning a Trip

As with any cruise, advance planning is the key to an enjoyable and safe passage. Along with this introduction and coverage in the next two issues, advance reading is well rewarded.

One of the best cruising guides to the ICW is *The Intracoastal Waterway, Norfolk to Miami: A Cockpit Cruising Handbook*, by Jan and Bill Moeller. Published by International Marine (800/262-4729), this comprehensive book covers virtually everything you need to know before and during time on the ICW. Along with interesting and helpful introductory material, the book proceeds in detail from Norfolk to Miami.

But the Moellers' excellent book doesn't replace the need for charts. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration

(NOAA) publishes "strip charts" for the entire ICW, but most boaters find them unwieldy to use in the cockpit. One better option is *The Intracoastal Waterway Chartbook: Norfolk to Miami*. Edited by John and Leslie Kettlewell and also published by International Marine, this book has reproductions of all the NOAA charts, as well as other helpful charts and information. In addition, International Marine's Tide Tables and Tidal Current Tables are highly recommended.

Once on the ICW, proper planning is still in order. Though overnight and refueling facilities are frequent, there are a few long stretches. The longest run without facilities is from Isle of Hope to Jekyll Island in Georgia (93.7 miles). The second longest stretch is from Alligator River Bridge to Upper Dowry Creek in North Carolina (48.8 miles). But with these longer runs and others, there are often facilities just one or more

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Boat Shows

October 1-3 and 9-11

Long Island In-Water Boat Show, NY
(516) 691-7050

October 2-3

Florida Sportsman Fishing Show, Miami, FL
(813) 839-7696
www.flsportsman.com

October 7-11

United States Sailboat Show, MD
(410) 268-8828
www.usboat.com

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Boat Show at Bayside, MA

Bayside Exposition Center

October 16-17

Florida Sportsman Fishing Show, Tampa, FL
(813) 839-7696
www.flsportsman.com

October 20-24

Long Beach Boat Show, CA
(714) 633-7581
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October 21-24

Mid-Atlantic Boat Show, MD
(800) 378-4315

October 28-Nov. 1

Ft. Lauderdale International Boat Show, FL
(800) 940-7642
www.showmanagement.com

November 4-7

Sail Expo St. Petersburg, FL
(401) 841-0900

November 6-7

Florida Sportsman Fishing Show, Orlando, FL
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www.flsportsman.com

November 11-14

Ft. Meyers Boat Show, FL
(954) 570-7785

November 18-20

Fish Expo (Trade Only), WA
www.divbusiness.com

November 18-21

St. Petersburg Boat Show, FL
(800) 940-7642
www.showmanagement.com

December 1-3

International Workboat Show, LA
(800) 454-3007

January 4-9

Kansas City Sportshow, MO
(612) 827-5833
www.generalsportshows.com

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(305) 531-8410

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Boater Quiz Reading the Clouds

Most of us can recognize a mackerel sky when we see one, but not everyone knows its meteorological name, and even fewer can read it as a sign of things to come. See how well you do in the following three-way match-up

Type:

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| 1. Cirrus | g. Cotton puffs |
| 2. Stratus | h. Tightly layered puffballs, medium altitude |
| 3. Cumulus | i. Heavy, low, gray, thick |
| 4. Altostratus | j. High sheets or gray haze, with solar/lunar halo |
| 5. Altocumulus | |
| 6. Stratocumulus | |
| 7. Cumulonimbus | |
| 8. Cirrocumulus | |
| 9. Nimbostratus | |
| 10. Cirrostratus | |

Appearance

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| a. Dark, tightly packed balls | Forecast |
| b. Puffy white | A. Change |
| c. High, gray, in flat sheets | B. Worsening, with possible lightning |
| d. High, wispy, white | C. Fair, but possible rain |
| e. Puffballs, "mackerel sky" | D. Fog, drizzle, rain |
| f. Thickening, darkening, medium | E. Warm and fair |
| | F. Fair, but possible storm |
| | G. Fair but changing |
| | H. Possible rain |
| | I. Drizzle |
| | J. Fair, but watch out if they darken |

Key to Answers: 1dE; 2cI; 3bJ; 4fH; 5gF; 6hA; 7aB; 8eG; 9dI; 10jC

Anchor Hang-ups

Some of the happiest parts of boating are the things that happen when you're standing still: a quiet picnic in the lee of a remote islet; an impromptu gam in a friendly cove; or a splash ashore to an inviting beach. In all of those situations - or even if your boat is small enough that it can be driven or dragged onto dry land - you'll want to secure it with an anchor.

Of course, there can be other reasons for dropping the hook that may not be quite as much fun: an unexpected loss of power; a sudden change in weather; or the need to reorient after missing a turn in unfamiliar waters. Whatever the motive, anchoring is one of those deceptively simple exercises that can be a source of all the wrong kind of surprises.

For example, nothing identifies us as alumnae of the School for Seagoing Simpletons quite as decisively as bending down at the skipper's signal to give the anchor the old heave-ho — and finding it is securely lashed to the deck. Or to toss it out with the appropriate elan, only to have it jerk to a stop a full foot above the water because of a kinked chain or knotted rode. (Crustier seadogs refer to the anchor line as a “rode,” most likely to avoid being understood. This can be useful information for someone striving to recover lost face on the backlash of an embarrassing gaffe: “What fool fouled the rode? Shiver me timbers.”) And then there's the boater who is so afraid of losing his anchor to thieves that he padlocks it in place and leaves the key in a cigar box under the work bench in his garage.

Here are some of the other common anchoring pit-falls, and some easy tips on how to avoid them.

The anchor, the rode or both can be tangled up with mooring lines, fishing equipment, even with ankles of passers-by. Keep it clear; the times you're going to need it are often spur-of-the-moment, and sometimes unforgiving.

The boat is moving backwards so fast the anchor sleds above the bottom, or if the hook has already taken a bite the rode is playing out too fast to be snubbed off. Use your sail or motor to move up on it.

Someone grabs a fast-moving anchor rode and

loses skin. Anchor handling is one of the best reasons to wear gloves, which should be kept close to where they're needed.

The part of the anchor rode which is supposed to be attached to the boat - called the “bitter end” by those who speak the language - isn't, and it follows the anchor overboard (thence, possibly, the name.) This is another situation best corrected in advance.

The wind or tide shifts, and the swinging boat fouls on someone else's anchor rode or bangs into an adjacent vessel. One way to avoid this is to secure both bow and stern. Another is to use two bow anchors, one on either side of the boat; this won't stop the boat from turning around, but it can greatly reduce the scope of the swing.

The anchor won't set. The most common reason is that the scope is too short for a good parallel pull along the bottom. This is easily corrected by playing out more rode. Other possibilities are the wrong type or size of anchor, or mud, clay or weed (usually requiring clearance by hand) fouls the flukes.

The anchor sets, but the boat settles back into the wrong position. This is a common problem in wind or moving water, because the anchor always hits bottom in a different place from where you let go of it. Pull it back up, clean the flukes if needed, and on your next try allow for drift.

The anchor is set, the scope is right, the weather is fair, so you turn in for the night — and two hours later you realize the boat has stopped rocking. This can be for a number of reasons: the weather, the tide and the current are in perfect stasis; you are in the tractor beam of an alien orbiter; or - and this is far more frequently the answer - you didn't check out tide charts or the depth for your anchorage, and now you're on the bottom. One way to find out which of the above pertains is to lie perfectly still and wait; unless the sea bed is very deep mud, you're going to start sliding to one side or another in your bunk as the boat heels over. A good time to drain the sink, flush the head, secure the dinner ware, and thank God for the fact that His tides flow in both directions twice every day. This is one case where there's no immediate need to check the anchor. ☺

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miles off the ICW proper. Even if you're in a sailboat, most of the ICW will need to be cruised under power.

During the busier spring and fall periods, it probably doesn't hurt to call ahead for a marina reservation (especially in South Florida). The Moellers' guide and a chartbook can help you plan the best refueling and overnight options.

With 130 bridges crossing the ICW, you'll see lots of bridges along the way. As mentioned, 85 of them need to be opened for most boats. Most of the bridges anywhere north of South Florida are opened as you approach. Once in South Florida (there are 40 opening bridges in the last 130 miles), many of the bridges have

restricted hours that limit when and how often they'll open. Again, a chartbook is crucial.

Along the way, boaters will enjoy long passages without seeing any other boat traffic. In other areas, interesting historical towns like Norfolk, Wilmington, Charleston, Beaufort, Savannah, and St. Augustine await curious boaters.

This introduction provides just a basic preview of the Intracoastal Waterway. Before setting out on the ICW, buy the book and chartbook mentioned above and look for more details in upcoming issues. ☺

Next Issue: Virginia to Florida on the Intracoastal