

“The Mini-Loop”

An Inland 1000 Mile Cruise - Part I

Story and photos by Tab Hauser

It is said doing the “Great Loop” is the pinnacle of inland cruising. The Great Loop is a counter-clockwise voyage of the eastern half of the United States. With time and responsibilities being a constraint, my wife, Maureen, and I took our 1999 46’ Viking Sport Cruiser *Miracle* on what we call the “Mini Loop”.

The mini loop is a great trip for people of all skills. It is not hard to plan and except for a few hours crossing Lake Ontario (a mini ocean in itself), you are always in protected water. Our route started from Manhasset Bay Marina, taking us up the Harlem River, Hudson River and into the Erie Canal, where, going through 20 locks, *Miracle* was lifted to our highest level of 420 feet. From there we cruised north to the Oswego Canal, coming down seven locks. We then crossed 50 miles of Lake Ontario, getting to the beautiful 1000 Islands (where we had rented a houseboat for our honeymoon 30 years earlier). From the 1000 Islands we continued east on the St. Lawrence River through the massive commercial locks, docking in the old city of Montreal. (In Montreal we left our boat, rented a car and drove to Quebec’s old city.) We continued down river to the beginning of the Richelieu River and Chambly locking system before entering Lake Champlain. We spent some time cruising around what has been called the “sixth great lake” before entering Champlain Canal in Whitehall. From there it was up and down the 13 locks until getting back to the Hudson River for the voyage home.

The trick to making any cruise successful is the planning. While we only had 23 days for this voyage, it took several evenings of careful planning. Planning started with getting charts and nautical guide books to back up our chart plotter. These included “The Cruising Guide NY State Canal System” as well as “Richardson’s Cruising Guide to Lake Ontario, Including the Thousand Islands.” We already had the “Cruising Guide the Hudson River”, the charts of which connect with the above at the St. Lawrence River. Charts are important in case your electronics fail. Our best investment for navigating on this voyage was the purchase of a memory flash card for our Navionics for the waters where our card fell short.

Next I reviewed the route in advance so we would know roughly where to stop and what to see along the way as well as where we could duck for cover in case of a storm. We also called several marinas where we thought we would need diesel to confirm that they were still operating.

This turned out to be a good idea because some marinas did not sell diesel anymore.

The Haul To Lake Ontario

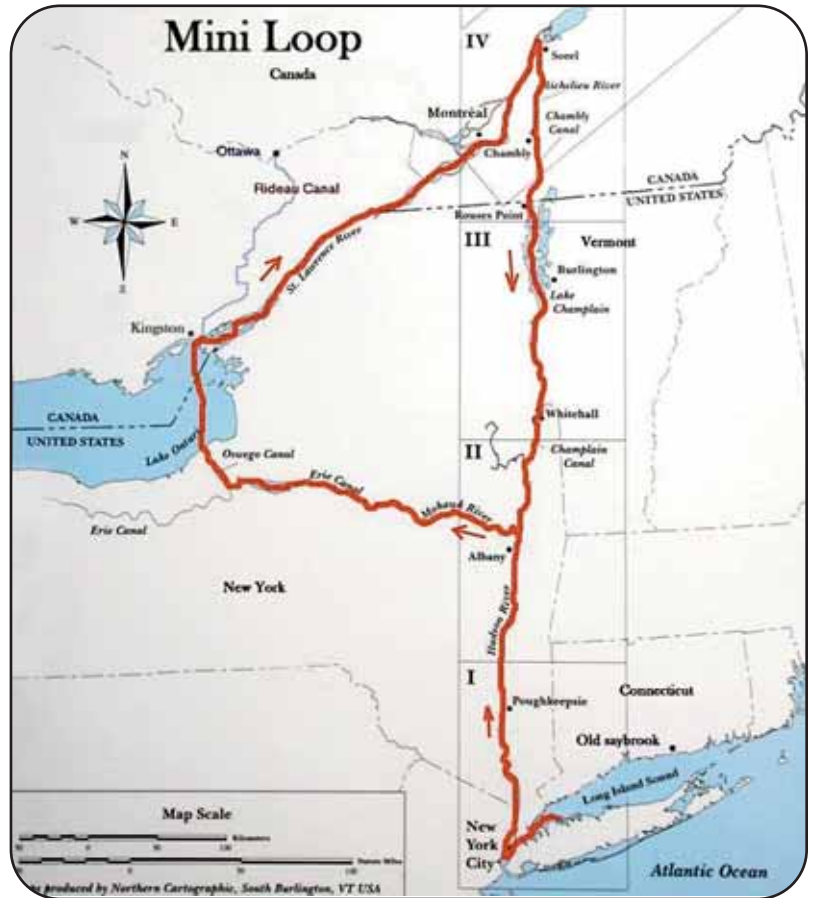
We left Port Washington at 3 p.m. under high clouds and calm seas, looking forward to the next 3 weeks. We entered Hell Gate with the tide giving us a friendly push, followed by the Harlem River, going faster than the cars stuck in traffic only 50 feet away on our portside. We did catch a break when we heard on the radio that the Spuyten Duyvil rotating bridge was open and throttled up to catch it. Leaving the Harlem River, you go from the hustle and bustle of the city and buildings to viewing the steep green cliffs of the Palisades.

That evening the river cooperated with a light breeze from the south and the tide starting coming in. The early part of the Hudson River is wide, and as you go up river, the towns get more spread apart and the hills alongside them get flatter. Our first big landmark was the Tappan Zee Bridge. A little later, cruising

at 20 knots, we went under the impressive Bear Mountain Bridge, built high up in a narrow section of river and directly into the mountain. The river there starts to narrow and curve, with its biggest bend at West Point. From the water, the Military Academy is an impressive grouping of medieval-looking buildings and walls. You can almost visualize the archers from long ago letting go of a few arrows. The next noteworthy site is Pollepel Island, or Bannerman Castle. This 6.5 acre island was a former munitions warehouse that holds the ruins of a “Gilded Age” castle built in 1901. From the water it looks almost like a set from horror movie.

With our timing good we decided to pass on our first destination, Front Street in Newburgh, and continue another 13 miles to Shadows One Marina, south of the Poughkeepsie Bridge. After four and half hours we were pleased to be met by the dock master, who helped us into our slip and insisted on tying us up for the evening. Dinner that night was above the marina at their restaurant, where we enjoyed the food and view.

The next morning we checked the weather by



Mini Loop course map.

smart phone to see how a major storm was doing west of Syracuse. Seeing the speed and direction of the storm, we knew we would be fine until at least Troy, where we could take cover if needed. We were anxious to be on the move since for next three days we were on the express boat to Lake Ontario. Our plan was to stop and enjoy the small towns on the Hudson River on the way back.

Cruising the Hudson River is very scenic, with a mix of hills, woods, mountains and beautiful homes having long lawns to the waterfront. From Poughkeepsie and closer to Kingston you can see the Catskill Mountains in the distance, and while they only have a height of around 3,000 feet, they look pretty large from sea level. We slowed down to take pictures of the lighthouses at Kingston, Saugerties and Athens/Hudson.

From there the river got narrow and as we approached Albany, went from scenic to industrial ugly. At noon we reached Albany, passing the retired Navy Destroyer *Slater* on our port side. One can stop in Albany, walk around and see the capital and the city from the day docks. Almost immediately after Albany the shoreline was park-like and tranquil. We arrived at the federal lock in a light drizzle and without much wait were officially lifted out of the tidal zone waters of the Hudson River and into the dammed part that goes north to Lake Champlain.

Shortly after the federal lock we reached Waterford, where a simple sign directs you to Buffalo to port or Lake Champlain to starboard. Here we checked the weather and saw the storm cells had broken up. Knowing the worst we could get was rain, we entered the Erie Canal on the first flight of 5 locks. These five locks raise a boat 169 feet in less than one half mile. Nowhere in the world is a boat lifted this high in such a short distance. It also takes



Waterford, NY, where our loop started and finished.

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about two hours to clear them. When we looked down to the Hudson River from the upper helm of the third lock, we were amazed at how high we were. These first locks and the canal connected to them go by quiet streets and behind people’s backyards. It is normal for a car to pass a boat since some of the streets are parallel to the canal.

Going through the locks can be a chore. You have to come in carefully with fenders on both sides and boat hook in hand to grab a line attached from above. Then you need to keep the stern close to the wall so you can grab a line there if you can reach. If you can’t grab a line, you can always put one of yours behind the cable anchored to the bottom and top of the lock and loop your line behind it so you hold both ends and steady the stern. After doing this all day, you can get worn out, along with your fenders. After several locks that were close together, we were pleased to take a break and enjoy the ride on the Mohawk River, which was peaceful and pretty.

After ten hours on the go and the last 30 minutes in rain, we headed to the River Link Café and



An Erie Canal lock.

Marina in Amsterdam, just a short distance away, on the advice of the friendly lock master. We really appreciated his advice and the price of \$1.00 per foot with electric. We had dinner there at the family-run restaurant. The owner/chef is very talented and the prices reasonable.

Continuing farther west, the Mohawk River, which is part of the Erie Canal, is pretty diverse. We cruised by the N.Y. Thruway for a short period, but much of the time we traveled through a woods-like

setting. While I had read about the interior waterways of New York, to actually experience them was another story. I thought how amazing it was that we were on a boat from Long Island near the middle of New York State, surrounded by trees and 420 feet above sea level. There were sections where we did not see a town or house for miles. I also thought it unusual that the canal in one section had us look down into a field and the woods slightly below us. Boats don’t usually look down to the land!

The third night we settled into the Mariners Landing at Sylvan Beach at the western end of Lake Oneida after 10 hours on the go. We picked Sylvan Beach because it had a small amusement park and easy access to restaurants.

We strolled into town only to find the amusement park closed, but there was enough entertainment by the water with music and people-watching. We docked at Mariners Landing, but boaters should know that much of the action takes place on the town dock by the lake.

We left Sylvan Beach with breakfast on the go while crossing over 20 miles of Lake Oneida. It was

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the first time we were able to open up our engines and reach our cruising speed of 20 knots since the Hudson River. That day the lake was calm, but the locals tell us when the winds are from the west, six-footers are not uncommon on the eastern side. On the other end of the lake we found the quiet boating town of Brewerton. Like Sylvan Beach, this pretty waterfront community was built around the canal

and lake; however, this was definitely the quieter side.

Our next destination, after turning north on the Oswego Canal, was Phoenix. I liked the idea of stopping in Phoenix because the village web site and brochure looked appealing for boaters. Here there is a non-profit group called the “Bridge Brats”, a group of young people who come to your boat and offer various services, for a donation, such as running into town to pick up a meal, running an errand or even washing your boat. We really wanted to like Phoenix, but after taking the self-walking tour, it seemed that this place has had its better days. (It was unfortunate the “Brats” don’t work on Sunday either)

From Phoenix we passed 6 more locks and made it to Oswego on Lake Ontario. At the Oswego Marina we learned that for \$5 you could take a taxi anywhere in town, so we changed venues for the night and went to an



First mate, Maureen, holding the bow steady as we lock up.



Erie Canal Mohawk River lock with 35’ lift.

Italian restaurant. The highlight of the evening was our cab driver. Since night business for him was down and seeing we had an interest in Oswego, he decided to give us the grand tour of city, which included the best place to see the sunset over the lake, the fort, the oldest homes, the university and downtown.

Look for Part II of our cruise in the November/December issue.

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