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ICE BREAKER

A Minnesota couple retrofits their winter cruiser

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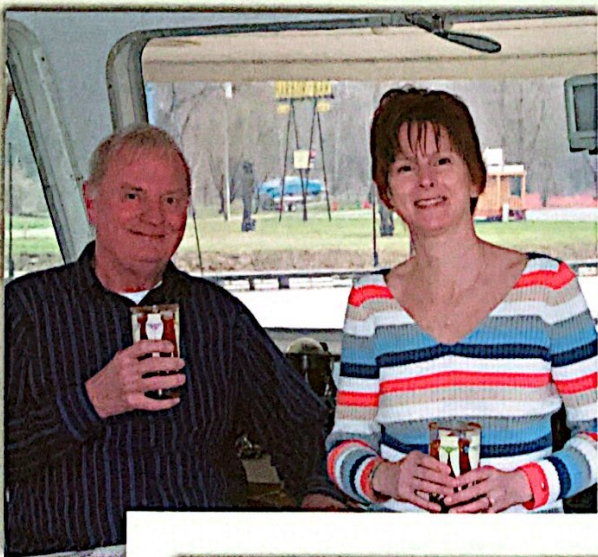


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THIS OLD BOAT

The River is Mine in the Winter

Minnesota couple loves cruising in the cold, snow and ice



It gets cold in Red Wing, Minn., in the winter. Temperatures in January and February average below 20 degrees and they get about 10 inches of snow a month. That is not exactly what most folks would consider houseboating weather.

But Dave Kvalsten and his wife Susan say they take their boat out as much in the winter as they do in the summer. "We love it," she says. He says winter is his favorite time because that is when he "owns the river." They think it is great fun to take their highly customized 1975, 65- by 16-foot Mattie out in the dead of winter and break ice. "It is even better if it's snowing," he jokes.

You might not want to do what they do in a normal houseboat but their Mattie is anything but. He originally found the boat in the spring of 1993 "left for dead" where it had been tied to an island for three years on a Mississippi River backwater.

"It was in desperate condition," he recalls. The top deck and floors were rotted, there was two feet of water in the engine compartment, one stern drive was missing and the other was mired in one and a half feet of mud.

By Gary Kramer

But rather than seeing a sow's ear, he saw a silk purse. It was the perfect answer for him because he had been looking for both a house and a houseboat. By overhauling the "handyman special," he could have them both. After buying it, he managed to get one engine running and took it to Hansen's Harbor on Lake Pepin in the spring of 1993. At that point, the boat was completely gutted and refit in three and a half months. Kvalsten says the 10 kW Onan generator is about the only original equipment now left on the boat. He named her *Kristen Lee* using "the age-old custom of naming a boat after the youngest female in the family."

He credits Hansens for doing great work and adds that the whole project became a family affair because he has some talented brothers and other relatives who pitched in. "I paid them by taking them out for rides," he laughs.

The refit started by sandblasting the hull and applying coal tar epoxy. New 300 HP MerCruisers with Bravo II drives went in, the walls got three inches of insulating foam plus a dead air space and the ceiling was packed with four inches of foam plus eight inches of fiberglass.

Because he planned to live on it, Kvalsten says everything was built to the highest safety standards, well past Coast Guard requirements. One of his brothers is an electrical engineer and he installed two 50-amp, 240-volt circuits to handle the electrical load.

The water system has a filter and softener and is pressurized by a shallow well pump. The standard house toilets have 24-volt mercury switches in the tanks that trip a relay that activates the pump so there is a great deal of suction when the toilet is flushed.

"When we are out," Susan says, "all the kids want to use our heads so they can hear the 'woosh.'" Because each toilet has a 300-gallon holding tank, the boat is usually pumped out by a land-based honey wagon because a marine pump-out can take three to four hours.

A 90,000 BTU high efficiency furnace keeps the boat toasty. Their propane bill





was only \$1,100 during the winter of 2005-2006 with the thermostat set at 72 degrees. When the boat is in her slip, a 1,000-gallon propane tank on shore fuels the furnace. They switch to a 100-gallon tank on the bow when they cast off.

Originally, the fresh air intakes sometimes frosted over when the temperature dipped below 20 degrees so Kvalsten designed special boxes to house and protect them. The central air conditioning system they installed wasn't quite cooling the tri-level boat evenly so they added a heat pump to provide better balance and more comfort.

The Kvalsten's "front door" is in the center of the salon and is reached by climbing several metal steps up from the front deck. Inside, there is about 1,000 square feet of space. The helm station is on the port side and has a GPS, a bow thruster that is rarely used, a rear view camera and radar, which Kvalsten says is indispensable on the river when fog sets in or when he runs at night and needs to know where the tows are.

The focal point of the salon is a baby grand piano that sits back against the port wall. "I play, badly," Kvalsten says, but guests like to hang out to listen and give it a go, he adds.

At that far end of the salon, a set of stairs lead down to the "mezzanine" level. From there, more steps lead down to the port and at the bottom of the steps a door hides a washer-dryer and leads aft to more storage and the mechanical room. A hallway leads forward to the master suite in the bow. There is lots of storage and a 48-inch walk-in shower in the master head. Just aft of the master, a five-person hot tub occupies the space that was formerly a second bedroom. A humidistat controls the moisture level when the tub is used either in summer or winter.

The aft mezzanine level has the galley, table seating for eight and a desk. After a 2005 remodel, the galley now sports maple cabinets crafted

by another relative, granite counter tops, stainless steel appliances, a convection oven and microwave and a full-sized refrigerator. The floor is a laminate and the ceiling is paneled with knotty pine.

On the aft deck, custom-built hydraulic davits hold one of Kvalsten's collection of old Evinrude boats. "My uncle was William C. Scott, president of Evinrude, so we always had the latest experimental boats," he says. He has six of those boats dating from the 1960s and his current tender is a 1967, 16-foot with a V6 Buick sterndrive. Besides just tooling around in it, it has earned its keep by towing the houseboat home and pulling trees that get lodged in the docks.

They both say the beauty of winter cruising is that besides the incredible serenity, solitude and peacefulness, the wildlife is spectacular. They see hundreds of eagles, have seen the entire river filled with ducks and get to watch endless parades of Canadian Snow Geese.



The boat is perfect for breaking ice because the dry weight of the boat is around 43 tons and it has a flat hull. They just run the bow up on the ice and weight of the boat cracks it as it settles.

Of course they do have some winter stories. One year they broke through eight inches of ice and then sat for the day in below zero temperatures partying with friends and got frozen in. "I just took a 10-gauge shotgun and blew holes around the boat to open the water so we could get going," Dave laughs. On another trip they took along winter survival suits for a polar plunge but quickly found out one had a pin-hole leak.

They have been known to cruise into harbors where ice fishermen sit shivering and go out on deck in shirtsleeves with beers to greet them. On one outing, they ran into a lot of pack ice and some folks on shore thought they were in trouble so called the police. "The police just told them it was just some crazy guy," Dave laughs.

After living aboard for 13 years, Dave says there are different noises and sensations in boats that you don't get on shore. In the spring, for instance, he can hear the carp pecking away at the algae on the hull underneath his bed. In winter, when the tows aren't running and there is no runoff from farms, the river cleans up considerably and visibility is much greater. When tows are running, they can feel the 10-inch bow wake one-quarter of a mile ahead of the tow and can even feel the boat shake and vibrate when a heavily loaded freight train rolls down the tracks across the river.

The irony of their love affair with winter cruising is that Dave and Susan are now thinking about selling the boat. "We've got three houses to maintain plus the boat," Dave says, "so we are thinking about putting our house in Red Wing and the boat on the market and keeping what doesn't sell first." It also wouldn't make them sad to let someone else get to enjoy the boat and experience the thrill of winter cruising like they have. Interested in a different sort of houseboating adventure? Contact the Kvalstens at david.kvalsten@usfed.org. 🏠

