

# Cruising the Inner Banks via Small Boat

By Larry and Anne Kumins

For years, our commitment to racing sailboats kept us from exploring the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW), which had long been on our hit parade. When racing became an obligation, we bailed out and bought *Rapid Escape*, a 21 foot center console and took off to explore the inshore side of the Outer Banks.

One nice thing about a boat this size is you don't even think about spending the night aboard. There are plenty of comfortable B & B's on the intracoastal, and some good restaurants too. Getting places in a timely way felt great after racing from nowhere-to-nowhere and back again at 6 knots.

Inner Banks towns more or less had their best times during the 1920s and 1950s. Some are enjoying resurgence now as their charms are rediscovered. Our tour was set for late-April and early-May, and focused on the west side of the ICW, where we could avoid the overdevelopment of beach communities.

*Rapid* was launched at Bath, a quiet old village about 15 miles from the ICW on a wide stretch of the Pamlico River. We began our tour with a day trip upstream to the historic commercial center of "little" Washington.

A low railroad bridge blocks the approach to Washington's waterfront. Rooster, the bridge tender at the time, would row his skiff out to open the bridge when he hears three-toots from your horn. It's been automated since, but his attention is sometimes called for.

The town dock offers free tie-up for the day. A stroll through Washington is a trip to Annapolis circa 1970, complete with old-city charm, a share of boarded-up storefronts, some newly opened businesses, and a few restaurants that need a shot-in-the-arm. It is home to the North Carolina Estuarium, a fine natural history museum featuring the Pamlico Sound watershed.

Heading back down the Pamlico, we toured Bath Creek, a speckled trout hot-spot lined with historic homes. The next day, it was on to the ICW and the Pungo River at Belhaven, a popular stop for ICW mariners. Belhaven features the renowned River Forest Manor, Marina, and Shipyard—a hangout for the rich and famous in better days. It's also home to Fishhooks Restaurant; we think it is the best restaurant in Beaufort County.

Next, we scooted across the Pamlico, taking a quick shot to the Neuse River. In a nor'easter, this river can be nasty. With *Rapid's* low freeboard and a following sea we felt it was best to divert to Oriental for lunch at the Tiki Bar and a walk around town. Oriental is a pleasant deepwater town bent toward the sailing crowd.

When the wind lightened we crossed the Neuse to Adams Creek and the ICW, headed for Beaufort. It's a short run at 30 knots and within the hour we were on the cell with the Beaufort Inn securing a room overlooking the slip where we would soon tie up. Dinner at

the fabulous Blue Moon restaurant awaited.

Beaufort is an exquisite old town and boating center, nicely restored. It offers easy access to one of North Carolina's three reliable ocean inlets, accessing Cape Lookout's rich fishing and the Gulf Stream. We ventured out to fish several miles into the deep green waters over Artificial Reef 315, but the weather wasn't conducive to catching.

Our goal for the next day was to reach Southport, just past the mouth of the Cape Fear River, past Wilmington, near the South Carolina border. We couldn't pull it off. We set off down Bogue Sound, running between Morehead and Atlantic City's beachside condo canyons. Bogue Sound features great sandbars and small islands where you may beach an outboard easily for an afternoon of solitary sunbathing. just don't let an outgoing tide leave you high and dry!

Swansboro lies at the southwest end of Bogue Sound, as it becomes the ICW again. It's a neat little town. We docked at Caspar's Boatyard and caught lunch at Yanas, a funky, Elvis-focused luncheonette. Had we been monitoring Ch. 16 to hear the notice to mariners, we would have known the Navy was conducting a live-fire exercise, lobbing shells from the ocean across the ICW into Camp Lejeune. We anchored near the patrol boat controlling southbound traffic, burning daylight until the 1700 all-clear.

The ICW was flat despite a 25-knot headwind, which doubled our fuel burn. Since gas docks are not everywhere, we slowed, hoping to find fuel and a place to stay. It's hard to avoid unlit obstacles and stay in deep water with low light; running at night is pretty stressful. We got to Wrightsville Beach just as the sun set. This scenic but chilly run was the only time our boat felt small. The Bridge Tender Marina was a welcome sight, with a good restaurant of the same name, and the Waterway Lodge next door. Food, fuel and a bed---all in one spot!

Next morning, we booked it to Southport, transiting 15 miles of intracoastal that is mostly un-developable marsh. At the Cape Fear River—ICW intersection, conditions became pretty sporty, still blowing 25 out of the south. Crossing the River, it was max trim-tabs down at 13 knots, and keeping alert for commercial traffic around the busy port of Wilmington. A good deep-V hull and a bit of respect for the sea-state provided an unremarkable transit in conditions that could have been scary.

Back in the protected ICW the sun welcomed us to the rediscovered old town of Southport. While showing early signs of gentrification with fixed-up old houses and a fancy new yacht basin, it still has down home features such as The Provision Company, a very local hang-out known for great boiled shrimp.

We also visited Bald Head Island, a private island that doesn't allow automobiles. We docked at the marina, and rented a golf cart for a tour. With pristine beaches, an old lighthouse, and very nice homes, this is the Nantucket of the South.

Our plan called for retracing of footsteps back to Beaufort with a side trip to Ocracoke Island the next day. But you can't always go as fast as you like on the ICW. There are plenty of navigational challenges, in this case a tug towing 1000 feet of dredge pipe hung

between two barges hidden around a sharp turn. Not wanting to cross in front of this juggernaut, we moved to the inside of the bend. Bad plan: the wall of steel cut the corner and compressed us into 18" of water, leaving us hard aground. A Good Samaritan in a skiff pulled us off.

With the wind behind us, and the pedal to the metal, we got to Beaufort quickly. Retracing our route, it was still another pretty day on the water, capped by (wow!) dinner at the Blue Moon—broiled wahoo with lobster/crab filled pasta, apple cobbler with house-made turbinado sugar ice cream..

An early start gave us a jump on the sea breeze, a good move as we transited big open water. Our route to Ocracoke Island took us up Adams Creek (ICW), east across the Neuse, and then 30 miles across the Pamlico Sound, a crossing that reminded us of home waters, the southern Chesapeake Bay with short, unforgiving chop. Thanks to our early start, most of the transit offered good running conditions. At about 1300, we pulled into the harbor at Silver Lake, on the island's west side.

Ocracoke is mostly national park, accessible only by boat and ferry. We tied up behind the seven-story Anchorage Inn, getting a top floor room with a view of the lighthouse and Coast Guard Station. A charter fishing hot-spot, we ate grilled tuna sandwiches and watched the dockside activity.

Our next early start did not pay off so well. The weather deteriorated as we cast off for the trip up the Pamlico Sound to Croatan Sound, a shallow stretch which connects Pamlico to Albemarle Sound with controlling depths of 10 feet or less. It began to rain sideways; the wind gusted to 35 knots, and we were in full foul-weather gear. Our chart-plotter's excellent cartography helped us keep a good course despite a wicked cross-wind as we transited slot-like channels into Manteo, on the east side of Roanoke Island.

Once inside, the friendly dock master settled *Rapid* in the Roanoke Island Inn's free slip and directed us to a good late lunch. Manteo is an Outer Banks garden spot with cute shops and restaurants. It is known for an outdoor dramatization of the "The Lost Colony," depicting the first settlers, who subsequently disappeared in the early 1600s. We're sure they were simply blown off the island.

Our next leg took us west into the Albemarle Sound in flat water to historic Edenton, about 70 miles away at the head of the Albemarle River. It's a quaint town featuring manicured historic homes and some good B & B's. The welcoming town dock offers visitors two nights of free dockage. Our Maryland registration numbers were a topic of conversation: Folks wanted to know our story, since we were so far from home in such a small boat. The Waterman's Grill offered quintessential southern hospitality and the biggest soft-shell crabs we've ever had.

The leg home, about 125 miles back to Bath, went quickly through spectacular wildlife preserves along the Alligator River/Canal. With the exception of an occasional hunting camp, there was no sign of human activity for what must be 50 miles. At times along this leg of our trip, the territory seemed so remote that we needed to remind ourselves we were still in the USA, as *Rapid* transited the Albemarle Sound and River, the Alligator

River and Canal, back to the Pungo River, and up the Pamlico River to our starting point. Recall this all took place during late April/early May. With concern about our survivability in cold water (it decreases dramatically as one passes 50), we did buy a life raft and EPIRB for peace of mind!

We had a great trip through a spectacularly beautiful part of the nation, proving there is no need to wait for Dow 36,000 and a 50-foot motor yacht. With a sturdy, seaworthy little craft, you can comfortably cruise the ICW and the Inner Banks. In spite of the early-season winds and the spray, we had great fun, no frightening experiences, and continue to make similar junkets. We recommend that folks do it before you get old!

**About the authors:** Anne and Larry Kumins are life long boaters who moved from Annapolis to the banks of the Pamlico River. After many years of racing sailboats intensively, their commitment became less rewarding and they crossed to the dark side of boating. They remain fascinated with their new-found ability to turn the key and transit distances reliably and quickly.