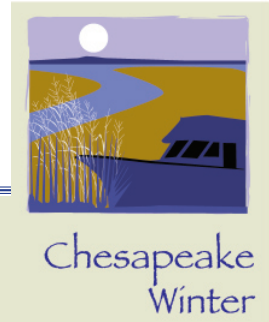




## The Simplicity of Living Aboard *Away from the dock is a world apart*

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Chuck it. Move aboard. The cliché occurs to many. Some actually do it.

Having owned the 40-foot trawler *Bright Pleiades* for three years and lived aboard half that time, we decided to weigh in on what it's like.

What got us thinking was a small flotilla of new Aqua-Lodges for sale in Deltaville, Va.: floating, cottage-like residences, not real boats at all. Navigation lights and anchor don't exist, motor is optional, plastic white picket fence is standard. Move into one at a marina, and you're a liveaboard. Uh, no thanks.

How about an ocean-going vessel, at sea for weeks or months until you've circled the planet? No. For now, the Chesapeake is our world.

Three-quarters of the time our ready-for-sea trawler might as well be an Aqua-Lodge. We're tied to a dock and live aboard. We get electricity and fresh water without limit, ready access to land and its bounty, have a car, Internet, phone, FedEx, familiar folks to talk to. Friends visit. We take walks and ride bikes. Sometimes we drive to interviews or a research site because it's quicker than going by boat.

The other quarter of the time we are under way: apart, unique, special. At least we feel that way, anchored in Back River, Virginia, after a half-day's run down the Bay under blue sky with a following breeze and a fair tide. We started from the south fork of Jackson Creek, off the Piankatank, where we had anchored two nights. The night before we'd spent at Crisfield.

### **Solitude in the Midst**

Back River is new to us, a treasure. It borders Langley Air Force Base and is in the shadow of the millions who live around Hampton and Newport News, yet Back River's blue-green pool of several square miles belongs to us, the only anchored boat. The nearest shore is low green marsh bordering the Plum Tree Island National Wildlife Refuge. A mile east, an abandoned oyster packing house and a few moored workboats are the nearest made structures. The few people we see are crabbers in their skiffs, working pots. From time to time, Air Force fighters scream overhead.

We cruise on into more new territory. Rounding Old Point Comfort, we head up the James River, passing the huge Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company (now Northrop Grumman), with its enormous cranes and naval ships under repair or construction, including CVN-77, the nation's new aircraft carrier to be completed in mid-2008. That'll be a liveaboard, with a ship's company of 3,200 plus an aircraft group of 2,480.

Passing under the James River Bridge just upstream, we enter a new country, another century: stately houses on the north shore, forests on the south. We thread our way up the narrow, winding Pagan River. Five miles later, after touching bottom twice on the low spring tide, we tie up at a small marina in historic Smithfield, Hamtown. Our boat — our magic Tidewater carpet — might as well be an Aqua-Lodge again.

### **Don't Sink, Make Port**

A sense of humor helps in living aboard. The weather picks up; parts break; you misread the chart, heading onto a shoal — and realize it with a jolt. The anchor drags, and you wake up on the beach. Even when all is going as it should, everyday life is, well, harder. You fill up the water tanks, pump out the holding tank, check on the batteries, change the engine oil, install that saltwater-washdown system that's been on your mind for a year, row the bicycles ashore in the dinghy, find a new grocery store, buy what's there instead of what's on your list, go without a daily newspaper, rock when you'd rather be still.

You live with limits — limits on what you have aboard and what you can get, limits on where you can go safely, limits on doing what you'd like or simply being lazy. The boat can make demands right now: Water in the bilge? Depth sounder on the blink?

Joseph Conrad says the sea's great attraction is its moral simplicity: Don't sink, make port. Ernest K. Gann writes in *Song of the Sirens* that modern humans need the oceans more than ever, for the minute slice of earth upon which we dwell changes constantly and sometimes overwhelmingly.

What are we to make, then, of our attraction to the Chesapeake, whose constant and sometimes overwhelming change seems to be taking away much of what we think important? Each boater makes the decision uniquely. The



Chesapeake  
Winter

common ground for liveboards may be that moment of deciding, of choosing something that's not a condo, a riding mower, a Starbucks.

Living aboard takes on a momentum, a rhythm of its own, stuffing the days full. The stars shine brighter than they do ashore.



*Bright Pleiades at anchor.*