

Cruising

The Otterbine family modified their newest center console and the only Grady-White Canyon 456 currently on the Great Lakes into their very own “Great Lakes RV.” Instead of cruising America’s roadways, however, the family plies the Great Lakes to top destinations, including the North Channel.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHRIS OTTERBINE



in a Great Lakes RV



(Top) Russ and Chris are dwarfed by the 456 hull. (Bottom) *End of the Line VI* in Sommerset Marina.

The Great Lakes are blessed with an abundance of cruising locations, and whenever boaters get together, you can count on listening to stories of everyone’s favorite port. Another “favorite” boaters will talk with you about is their boat. It doesn’t seem to matter if they cruise on a sailboat, on a powerboat, or if they trailer to a location and day cruise — the boat is a member of the family.

Throughout more than 50 years of boating, my husband, Russ, and I have been blessed to have had 15 such “members” of our family. Each had its own name and its own purpose for that time in our lives, such as an offshore when the noise didn’t bother us, or a cabin cruiser when we had kids and needed more room. We even picked a smaller outboard, a Grady-White 330, to complete the Great Loop in 2007. Our current boat is the new Grady-White Canyon 456. We have hull No. 8 and, currently, it’s the first and only 456 on the Great Lakes.

A lot of thought went into getting a center console boat. We wanted entertaining space, fore and aft. We wanted shade, fore and aft. We wanted a cabin with ample room and storage so we could spend several weeks aboard. Perhaps the most important reason for us to get a center console was safety on deck. I’m sure everyone knows what it’s like to pull into dock and find that the stainless rail isn’t going to keep you from flipping into the drink if you roll. This wasn’t so much of an issue when we were younger, but at 71 and 79, things change, like balance. The center console boat will allow us to keep boating for — knock on teak — many more years.

Finding the perfect “Great Lakes RV”

We began the search for a center console-style boat in 2018 at the Miami International Boat Show. After all, it’s all there. Our dock neighbors and fellow cruisers had everything planned out for us. We climbed on, off and through more center consoles than I could have imagined existed. We definitely had some favorites, but none had all the features we thought we needed.

Although the Grady-White 456 was at that show, we missed it. It wasn’t until we were back home in Oldsmar, Florida, that we began to see the advertising. She was a massive boat, 48 feet in length with the engines and a hefty 14-foot beam. Since we had

owned Gradys before, we went to see Dave Bair at Quality Boats in Clearwater, who handled Grady-White products.

We would soon adopt *End of the Line VI* and begin an adventure that would last from February 2018 to delivery in April 2019. Grady’s hull No. 1, *The Grady Lady*, was making the rounds of all the boat shows up and down the Atlantic. *The Grady Lady* was the only 456 available to show, as full production wouldn’t begin until fall 2018 on the next hull numbers. This meant our hull No. 8 wouldn’t finish production until April 2019, which suited us well. We knew we were taking the boat to Michigan for the summer and that slot still gave us plenty of time to meet our schedule.

Grady had touted this boat as a saltwater fishing machine. We have saltwater fished in Florida and were no longer interested using our new Grady in that fashion. Three hours of cleaning fish and salt from every nook and cranny had lost its appeal.

But the boat was perfect for what did appeal to us — summer boating on the fresh water of the Great Lakes. Combined with our experience, what we want from cruising and the willingness of Grady-White to work with our ideas, we now have what I like to call our “Great Lakes RV.”

Time to customize

One of the first things Grady-White did for us was to reinforce the access lid to the Seakeeper. On its company boat, this held the leaning post and was only reinforced beneath the deck plate. Knowing we were going to remove the post and add a table and a bike rack in this location, they reinforced the entire lid. This now has become standard on all 456s. Grady also removed the rod holders from the shower area, which was a clever idea, just not for us. The cubbies beside the bed were very generous, especially after we had Grady delete the two sets of rod storage racks. We also opted out of the outriggers. The final change we made was to add a second deck refrigerator.



(Top) Rafting off with *Mental Floss* and *Burning Daylight* in the picture-perfect Benjamins. (Above) Lunch on Beaverstone Bay with Tim and Lisa Thomas and Kem and Mary Hawkins. (Left) Grady reinforced the lid to the Seakeeper to allow for a table and bike rack.

(Right) The ebikes ride safe and dry. (Below top) Afternoon naps in the shade are an onboard luxury. (Below middle) Boating with friends with the same hobbies is special. (Bottom) Relaxing at DeTour Village with our *End of the Line* cups, a gift from Lisa.



On the port side of the boat, there were two sets of drawers. With abundant storage already on deck, we replaced one set with the refrigerator. They told us at Grady they had always planned to offer this substitution but never figured it would happen as soon as hull No. 8.

The boat finally made it to Michigan on April 15, 2019. Our first cruise was planned for the Bike Fest on Beaver Island in mid-June, followed by Suttons Bay for the Fourth of July, and the North Channel in late July. Final modifications were done by Mobile Marine in East Jordan, Michigan. We had a Mediterranean sunshade installed up front, and we added a teak table using a deck plate that would accommodate both the table and a modified bike rack.

Finally, after 15 months of planning and anticipation, *End of the Line VI* slid into the rather coolish waters of Lake Charlevoix.

Maiden voyage

We anticipated issues with a new boat, but the shakedown cruise to the Bike Fest went off without a hitch. I had more issues with my ebike. Our next trip was to Suttons Bay, where we could ride the trails all the way to Traverse City. This is where having boarding doors on both sides of the boat is a luxury; no longer do we worry about finding a slip with just a starboard or just a port presentation.

It was during these two trips that we found an added benefit to the center console: Our boat finally became the place to gather with our boating friends. With shade fore and aft, everyone could enjoy conversation with a drink in hand or an afternoon nap without the sun beating down upon us.

Although each weekend trip we took was a rehearsal for our trip through the North Channel, planning had begun during the winter, which is actually the best time to begin planning an extended cruise — reservations are wide open.

The North Channel

We were the smaller of the three boats making the trip from Boyne City, Michigan, to Killarney, Ontario. The other boats were a Sunseeker and a Tiara. Those boats have plenty of storage, of course, but when it came to supplying the ice, it was our huge aft freezer that carried enough for 11 days on the water. Surprisingly, by setting its temperature to 37 degrees Fahrenheit, the ice remained frozen but the pop, water, food and adult beverages did not freeze.



(Left) Every direction in the Benjamins has a view. (Below top) RV smorgasbord in the North Channel. (Below middle) Tim and Kem enjoy not being captains today. (Bottom) A DVD gives us a unique boating atmosphere on a cool Killarney evening.



Our first night was spent at the DNR marina in DeTour Village. We hadn't been to DeTour in years and found the marina and town to be welcoming. Since it's only a four-hour cruise from home, we were in early enough to get lunch and enjoy some shopping and the surrounding area. We also made detailed plans on how to approach our anchorage in the South Benjamin Islands, which included a safety check of all boats. Our "cruising doctor" made sure each of us knew the location of all medical and safety equipment onboard each boat, including AEDs on the other two boats.

It was our plan to leave by 7 a.m. in order to arrive at the anchorage just as others were leaving. That plan worked out well. We knew the forecast wind direction and found the perfect spot. Our "maties" took their dinghies off the cradles and we spent time exploring North and South Benjamin Islands. Having an outdoor grill on the Grady was perfect for our grill master, Russ. Hamburgers, hot dogs, brats and shrimp were staples for evening meals, but the specialty was morning pancakes.

Upon leaving the anchorage for Little Current, we ran into our only rough water. Winds were from the south, leaving us exposed for about five miles as we ran east, just north of Amedroz and Bedford Islands. Standard on the Grady, our Seakeeper served us well, providing a perfect, knocked down path for our friends to follow.

After Little Current, we slipped over to Killarney. Having been there several times, we have begun to use it as a home port and explore further into the North Channel on a day trip basis.

Our exploring this year took us into the Killarney Provincial Park and through the Collins Inlet. Instead of taking all three boats, we set out in the Grady. It was the perfect tour vessel. Views were incredible and the other two captains were thrilled to leave the driving to someone else for a change.

Our run home was through Yacht Haven on Drummond Island, as it is for most cruisers, which is a great place to ride bikes and golf. After a two-day stay on Mackinac Island for yet more bikes and golf, we headed for home, only two and a half hours away.

We will continue to include Killarney and the Mountain Lodge in our future cruising plans. And, when we get together this winter, rumor has it we may venture into planning a Lake Superior cruise. In the meantime, the bikes and the golf clubs come off *End of the Line VI* and the downriggers go on. With the push of a button on the Yamaha Helm Master, our Great Lakes RV is transformed back into a freshwater fishing machine. Salmon beware. ★

About the author:

Russ and Chris Otterbine, both born and raised in Michigan, are now Florida residents. They spend their summers in Boyne City, Michigan. Both have their captain's licenses and are retired.