



Lori and Russ aboard their Goldilocks catamaran after finally finding one that fits just right.

Q&A

## LIVE THE DREAM

For more than 13 years, Russ and Lori Rackliffe have been full-time cat cruisers. Here's a taste of what they've learned since moving aboard.

BY MIKE SMITH

**I**n 2010, Russ and Lori Rackliffe bought a Maine Cat 41, sold their house, took early retirement, and became full-time cruisers. Since then, they've lived aboard two other cats—a PDQ 34 and a Manta 44—and spent one year living and land-cruising in an RV. They've learned a lot in the past 13 years and shared their knowledge with *Multihull Power & Sail*.

**MHP&S:** You've owned three cats. Have you ever owned a monohull?

**Russ & Lori Rackliffe:** Yes, we owned several Larson and Sea Ray powerboats during the years while our son was growing up.

**MHP&S:** Did you buy the Maine Cat specifically for living aboard, or did you already own it when you made your escape? Did it work out as planned?

**R&LR:** We spent several years researching our perfect cruising boat. We were drawn to cats after a magical sailing cat charter

in the BVIs (as many have been). After going aboard a Maine Cat 41 owned by full-time cruisers, and chartering one in the Abacos, we felt it would be ideal for us. The fully enclosed cockpit/living space was a big draw. Unfortunately, our particular Maine Cat had construction defects, which ended our plans.

**MHP&S:** Why did you move, albeit briefly, into an RV? What made you decide to return to boat-living, but in a power cat rather than sail?

**R&LR:** After our horrific (and financially draining) experience with our Maine Cat, our spirits were simply too broken to continue cruising. While the draw of less cost and less danger was appealing, the reality of nightly stays in mostly KOA campgrounds sucked the life out of us, compared to the more adventurous life of cruising, so our RV years totaled less than one.

**MHP&S:** Does the convenience of power offset the added fuel costs and the loss of the occasional joy of sailing on those days when the wind is just right?

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*The Manta is the latest of several cats they've owned, including a stint sailing.*

**R&LR:** We didn't even know how to sail when we purchased our 41 sailing cat! We taught ourselves to sail and gave it our best shot for several years (and may have continued if not for our Maine Cat problems). We are extremely surprised at how few East Coast cruisers actually sail. In the end, most seem to want to travel in good weather without getting beat up. Offshore passages (versus the ICW) can be great, but only if you don't have to wait a week for the weather to cooperate. In the end, 50 to 70 miles a day motoring on the ICW gets you up or down the coast easily and safely.

**MHP&S:** What factors contributed to the move from the PDQ into the Manta? Do you see the Manta as your long-term boat, or might there be another move up in a few years?

**R&LR:** Our regular discussions of "what's next" led us to many varied responses. In the end, the cruising lifestyle was, to us, irreplaceable, but we were a bit confined after seven years of full-time cruising on a 34-foot power cat. Over the years we had considered a larger power cat, but availability and costs had always done us in.

We happened to come across a Manta 44 last fall on our trip south; the owners invited us aboard for a tour. They told us the boat would be on the market in 2023, and by March 23, 2023, she was ours. We went from being happily anchored in George Town, Exumas, in our PDQ in January to crossing back a few weeks later to Vero Beach, then to Stuart, preparing our PDQ for sale, officially viewing the Manta, surveying, packing, and closing. This will be our final cruising boat. Our Manta offers nearly twice the living space as our PDQ, and other than some initial projects and hardships, we are happy with her!

**MHP&S:** What are the advantages/disadvantages of power versus sail when it comes to cats?

**R&LR:** All cats are great—we would never go back to a monohull. The power versus sail is a much more complicated question. While sailing is more romantic, traveling 3,000 miles per year up, around, and down the East Coast from New England to the Bahamas was tiring for us. Nights offshore were not our favorite at all. Nor were some of the inlets and then all of the ICW bridges—yikes! Some high-rise ICW





*The Manta offers more space than their previous boat, something that's precious when living on it full-time.*

bridges would frequently have only 62 to 63 feet of clearance (we needed 63½ feet) and the schedules of opening bridges were becoming much more restricted.

Like the PDQ, our Manta draws only 3 feet. With an air draft of 16 feet, we need openings at only a handful of ICW bridges. We often travel at only 8 knots, so our fuel burn is reasonable, but 18 knots is nice when you need it. We never travel at night anymore, as even the 120 miles between NYC and Cape May, New Jersey, is no problem in daylight. Having no mast is, of course, preferable if you think you may ever do the Great Loop in the future, or even a partial loop, or Lake Champlain and back. But the East Coast/Bahamas cruising we do is much different than going farther, when a sailing cat would likely be preferable over power.

**MHP&S:** What unexpected issues arose—finding a slip for the cat, keeping in touch with folks on shore when cruising, or arranging for a shoreside address, for example?

**R&LR:** Slips have hardly ever been a problem with any of our cats, except in the Northeast. Most ICW marinas have dockage alongside and/or T-heads so there is little difficulty or extra

cost. Connecticut, however, is a different story—we have great difficulty and often have to pay for a larger-size slip.

Since we started cruising in 2010, communications have become much easier. Even just using cellular data, we have communications and can stream anything we want from New England to the Bahamas 95% of the time.

For mail, most cruisers use SBI Mail Service—they e-mail us our mail (the envelope and/or the contents) as needed. Of course, online banking makes life so much easier as well. The only drawback with banking is that most banks and financial institutions deem SBI as a dropbox and won't allow you to use it as your address—you may need to use the address of family or friends instead.

**MHP&S:** Finally, what insider advice can you share for folks who want to move aboard full-time?

**R&LR:** Live your dream! Our plans were accelerated after seeing retirement plans for some family and friends evaporate due to health issues. Not only is cruising easier without major health problems, most cruisers appear to have fewer health problems than folks living ashore. 🐾