

TALES FROM MODERN DAY MERMAIDS:
WOMEN WHO ANSWERED THE CALL OF THE SEA

by Mary Umstot
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Women living aboard vessels, instead of perching on rocks; freely exploring the waters around them; and calling to others to join in their pleasure; created a unique set of friends for me--“modern day mermaids.” I asked sixteen female friends four specific questions: what lured you to sea, what kept you there, how had life at sea changed you, and can you tell me a personal story. Total time at sea, including mine, equaled over 160 years. Thirteen cruised on sailboats (S/V); four, including myself, traveled on powerboats (M/V). Six were on a circumnavigation. Of the sixteen, one was Australian; three, Canadian; the rest Americans.

What lured these women to a life at sea? Most gave credit to their husband for chasing his dream. They joined in for the adventure it offered. Other lures: a love of the water, boating in general, wanting to see the world by broadening horizons, meeting people and experiencing cultures, and escaping to another realm of possibilities.

What kept them there? Maybe feeling anxious at first, going to sea offered these women freedom, liberty, a fantastic travel experience, tasting exotic foods, trying on a new language—and making friends with a special brand of like-minded gypsies.

How has the experience changed you? Ability to overcome fear in general; learning how to cope in emergencies and not panic over situations that can cause an out-of-control feeling; being mentally flexible and less afraid of the unknown; and learning all peoples of the world are not different from you, so it is easy to venture out and meet them.

Personal stories, rich and varied, ranged from fear-provoking to awe-inspiring situations: weather episodes, nature at its best, arriving at special places to fulfill a dream, taking over for the Captain when he had acute problems, and religious experiences, to name a few.

Leaving an enjoyable job and security of regular paychecks became the hardest part for S/V *Ahquabi's* Pam Dage (USA). Her personal story: in Panama's San Blas Islands, a local Kuna Indian family stopped by their boat to visit. Pam gave the boys candy and parents, clean drinking water. The mother was visibly pregnant. On another day, the family returned with Grandma in their canoe. No Mom. Grandma asked about Pam and Bruce with no children. Pam politely answered. “Finally Grandma grabbed the smallest boy and held him up to us and said, ‘take him to America with you.’ The poor child was terrified, as was Dad and brother. Apparently she thought we needed a child and they didn't have enough money to care for a growing family, and this would help both problems. We thanked her, but said we could not take the boy. We slipped away the next day to avoid a repeat experience or a baby left in the cockpit.”

M/V *Cloverleaf's* Bev Feiges (from the USA prairies) thinks, "People who grew up in the wide open spaces have a natural affinity for the sea and a natural desire to see what is over the next rise of land, an inborn urge to see what is beyond the horizon."

Nancy Day(USA) of S/V*Good Company*, had an unusual marriage proposal. "Someday I am going cruising on a sail boat, do you want to go?" Her answer: "Yes." But she almost missed her opportunity to see the world when she and Marvin were caught in a Gulf of Mexico storm right after they had started sailing together. A flying fish landed on board. Still harnessed in the cockpit, with waves crashing over the boat, she leaned over to save it. "Marvin grabbed me, held up an imaginary phone and called my son. 'Well Jack, your mother saved a flying fish, but I am afraid we lost her in the process.'"

Mary Verlaque (USA), of S/V*Wanda*, left home with husband, two teenagers and two cats for a year's getaway. They had a difficult adjustment back on land, so when the youngest teen begged to go cruising again, they grabbed the opportunity. Her personal story involves a rescue. They found two men in the water near Oriental, N.C. along a wide stretch of the Intra Coastal Waterway (East Coast USA), whose tug had developed a leak and started sinking, too fast for a "Mayday" call. After two hours in the cold water, the Captain could hardly speak or move. Mary and Christian pulled them on board, warmed them inside and out, while contacting the Coast Guard. Both men survived, thankful this boat had seen them; about ten others had not. Mary felt a "guiding hand" helped.

Liljana Yasruti says, "Salah and I boated for nearly thirty years (mostly in the States on other boats, recently in the Mediterranean on M/V *Liljana*), so life on the water has been another way of moving around and enjoying it. My desire was driven by our mutual appreciation of what we do." The highlight for them has been living aboard and cruising the Adriatic and eastern Mediterranean, their first homes. She is Macedonian; and he, Palestinian by birth. Liljana summed up her cruising with this statement, "From being stranded by sea conditions on some uninhabited Greek Island, to the baguettes of the French Canals, from meeting villagers, Parisians, and the dolphins, to the religious, political, and cultural varieties of realities, I cannot think of any better or similar way to do it."

Lesley Gray, of S/V*Magnum* (from Australia), met Danny thirty years ago while traveling overseas. He described his lifelong dream of sailing around the world. However, she had never sailed before. They bought a 33' ketch and sailed some out of Queensland. She decided it was not too bad, so they sold everything they owned and upgraded to a 40' sloop for years of adventure on the seven seas. Lesley will never forget being invited to an anniversary on a small island in New Guinea and sharing a meal—the only white faces there. Also, the huge waves breaking over their boat leaving Noumea in the South Pacific after a cyclone had gone through, "sounding like a high speed runaway train bearing down on them."

Sara Boys (USA) of *S/V Mindemoya*, proclaims, “Cruising as a lifestyle allows you to peel away the layers that cover responsibilities and schedules and stuff to let the real self shine through. As a live aboard on a small sailboat those layers are minimized. Loneliness, fear, lack of language and local knowledge, minimal resources, lack of space, discomforts of weather and constant companionship of my mate are some of this life that forced me to look within and discover my core being, the peace and joy within me.” She also taught a yoga class,” meeting each morning on the dock with makeshift mats and blankets to stretch and strengthen and relax our bodies. One morning I realized we were the entertainment for the arriving cruise ship. The passengers were lined up along the upper decks with their videos taping our little class for everyone back home to see. Later in the day as I was stomping in the big black tub, I again discovered I was news for the folks back home. See the poor lady on the deck of that little boat doing her laundry. Obviously she doesn’t have a washing machine. And that is correct.”

Ellen Ernisse and husband bought *S/V Peace and Aloha* after they had chartered in Tahiti and the full moon rising behind swaying palm trees lured them to go and do. The experience changed her in several ways. She learned patience and diplomacy when dealing with customs and immigration, dealing with emotions from sheer terror and fear to pure boredom (not much of that) and learning we don’t really need 500 types of cereal to choose from at Wal-Mart (USA).

S/V Quarterdeck’s Chief Mate, Sandra Johnston (Canadian): “We both worked hard and although we had a lovely house, we hardly saw it or each other. Cruising would be a healthy change of lifestyle.” Her special memory of paddling her kayak back from the Chagos reef and stopping to take photos of sea life and coral, distracted by yellow and blue striped grunts schooled along one side of the kayak and blue tangs on the other, while a long-tailed tropic bird soared overhead, left her “feeling very satisfied and content.”

Barbara Schmid wanted to get away from the fast-paced work life; slow down and see what’s around the next bend—a need to have an adventure. One memory: her husband forgetting their anniversary as they rode out a furious storm that day on *S/V Sayonara*. She offset that with a positive religious experience in Amalfi, Italy at the Cathedral of St Andrew. Entering to have some quiet time and think about her nephew in Iraq, also his mother, her sister, she immediately had to sit down. “I could hardly breathe. It wasn’t the beauty of the cathedral. Rather, it was the feeling that a great weight was lifted from my shoulders. I suddenly knew my nephew was going to be all right and thus my sister and her family was going to be fine. I still can’t recall this event without tears of relief springing to my eyes.”

Canadian Janet Peters, from *S/V Solara*, knew her husband, upon retirement, would go without her on a trip around the world. Not to be left behind she started taking courses, and before long “the whole adventure became a lure.” She relates “storms are unforgettable; also, going through the pirate area in the Gulf of Aden and helping a fellow cruiser who was being chased.” But there are magnificent sunrises, sunsets, and moonrises. Janet’s husband lost part of his finger in Sri Lanka. Although he received

medical help, he couldn't sail the boat to the Maldives. She filled the bill as captain for that trip.

Martha Johnson and her mate left the States on *S/V Transit* telling family and friends in the States they would be back in 5 or 6 years. Their cruise lasted 11 ½ years, a lot longer than expected, starting in the Caribbean, turning right towards the Panama Canal and then kept heading west, and west, until they completed 38,000 miles. On passages she could not relax and sleep at the beginning of their sea travels. She kept looking outside the cabin to make sure Richard was still there (even though harnessed, there is still an element of danger.) Over time she worked this out, but still looks out occasionally on long passages with only the two of them on board. The sea is vast and losing someone overboard is not a pleasant thought. And Martha still does a double take when she sees a cruiser again, maybe as long as ten years has passed.

During our first year on *M/V Teka III*, we aborted a trip south to Mexico due to winter storms arriving early, one marching on the back of another. We did manage to get to the Columbia River, but had to retreat. With no moon and stormy conditions at the entrance to Juan de Fuca Strait, we had our work cut out for us. Fortunately Denis had fished that area around Tatoosh many years and knew the best way to work our way in. With the tide on its way out and the waves assembling themselves in stacks, it did not look good. Even in the pitch black night, outside the port-side pilot house window, I could see the waves building and cresting, all the time knowing we had to make a starboard turn, and hopefully not broach. I watched Denis bring us around. The whole experience felt like someone had lifted the stern and settled it in just the right spot on the wave and sent us on our way. That night I learned I had a special ship and a good captain.

Texan Sue Spencer of *M/V UnoMas* focused on her chance to improve language skills, learn more about customs and traditions of foreign countries. Missing television was no problem for her. *UnoMas* had a major problem during the 2004 Nordhavn Atlantic Rally. Twelve-to-fourteen-foot seas and winds to 51 knots caused the boat to roll 65 degrees, taking on water, which “fried the inverter.” They lost their a/c power (which cooled their stabilizers), making the stabilizers unusable. To fix the problem, they managed to turn the boat around in heavy seas, for a smoother ride. And after about 5 hours, Justin, from the escort boat, swam over and made a temporary fix to get the a/c pump rewired via the generator and they were okay to continue on to Horta. She says, “The rally was the highlight of our adventures and we would do it again in a heartbeat.”

Early background experiences may also have entered the equation of the sea's lure, especially for Judy Millard of *S/V Velea IV*, another Canadian. “I wanted to sail from first having had Arthur Ransome's ‘Swallows and Amazons’ read to me at age five.” As an adult, she planned to get her own small boat for the Great Lakes, but then she met Aubrey. Both boat and range expanded. Her story is quite amusing. “While heading from Denmark to Norway we got a jib sheet caught around the prop. After a night spent hove to, with hourly Security calls indicating our position and ‘not able to maneuver,’ we rigged a new sheet, cut the wrapped one, and sailed up a fjord to a side bay anchorage. Unfortunately, as we rounded up into the bay and lowered sails and

anchor, the wind blowing down the side valley caught us and we began dragging onto the rocks. Fortunately the second anchor held, with our stern about 100 feet from a very rocky shoreline. My husband immediately got the dinghy launched. Meanwhile, it would be necessary for one of us to get into the water to cut the line free of the shaft. It was the end of May in Norway. Extrapolating from Canadian inland waters, where at that time of year working time in the water is about five minutes, and survival time about twenty, I assumed the person in the water would be unable to climb out. Well, Aubrey is more able to lift me than vice versa; and besides, subcutaneous fat must be good for something. So, I disappeared below, to return on deck a couple of minutes later with mask, snorkel, and breadknife, stark naked save for a safety harness. My bathing suit was packed deep (this was May, after all), and if anyone saw and was interested, we could use the extra help. As it turned out, the water, though extremely unpleasantly cold, was not dangerously so, and I was able to cut the line free and climb back aboard with no difficulty. It does make a really good story, and a number of people who have heard it claim that is their automatic mental image of me.”

Other stories covered climbing glaciers, seeing volcanoes at work, or in Tari McCabe’s case (*S/V Vision*), sailing down the Suez Canal. The authorities had closed the canal for the flotilla of 50 yachts on the Eastern Med Yacht Rally, to welcome them with “dressed tugs, buildings, and fishing boats,” plus music, etc.—an overwhelming experience for an American in Egypt.

Diana Thompson of *S/V Zephyrus*, says “I am not now so much concerned about having perfect clothes, hair, make-up. I can talk engines and boat stuff with the guys and not get bored. If I went on a job interview and they asked me what my talents were, I would answer, “You name the job and I will tackle it.” I am not afraid to take on new challenges.” In addition, *Zephyrus* “got caught between two cyclones in the Pacific. One passed within 100 nautical miles before turning 180 degrees.” She had to take the helm when her husband contracted dengue fever off Sudan, and again when he hurt his back off Spain.

All in all, these modern day mermaids reinforced life at sea as a positive, rewarding personal growth experience.

The End