

2020



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Quebec City is seen off the stern of Hokulani as Jock Williams and his crew head to their next port on the Downeast Loop. Photo courtesy Jock Williams

Tips for Older Boaters Planning a Long Cruise

Octogenarian Jock Williams cruised the 2,700-mile Downeast Loop

By Laurie Schreiber

IF OLDER BOATERS contemplating an extended cruise need inspiration, they can look to John “Jock” Williams.

At age 80, Williams, owner of John Williams Boat Company in Hall Quarry, Maine, completed the 2,700-mile Downeast Loop in about three months last year. Taking a counter-clockwise route, he motored up the Maine and Nova Scotia coast, west to the Gaspé peninsula, down the St. Lawrence River to Quebec,

south to Lake Champlain, through the 60-mile Champlain Canal to the Hudson River, down to New York, then back to Maine. Various friends and family members joined him at different points of the journey.

Williams checked a couple of boxes that ensured a successful trip. He has plenty of nautical experience. A 1962 graduate of Colby College, he went on to Naval Officer Candidate School and

was subsequently assigned to a U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey ship charting the South China Sea for vessels in the Vietnam War. Later, he was stationed at the U.S. Naval Academy Sailing Office in Annapolis, and served as varsity sailing coach. He skippered a contender in the Bermuda Race and crewed in six additional Bermuda Races. He's also competed in two transatlantic races, the TransPac, and almost every major ocean race in the Northeast.

He also knew his boat quite well—a Stanley 36, named *Hokulani*, that his company built in 2000.

"I've been steaming those Stanley models almost 50 years," he said. "I know what to expect of the boat under most conditions."

The folks at his yard performed extensive upgrades, including varnish, new electronics, life raft, safety gear, connections for medical assistance, and going over all of the systems.

"Part of the fun portion of these excursions is getting the boat ready," he said.

The trip was a year and a half in the planning. Williams contemplated several routes before deciding on the Downeast Loop, one of a number of "mini-loops" along with the well-known "Great Loop." With two friends who were experienced cruisers, he got underway July 14 at 5 a.m. The first leg included a 12-hour shot from Hall Quarry to Cape Sable on Nova Scotia.

But he didn't rough it. Williams laid a track that called for about eight hours per day of steaming, arriving in a new port each evening for onshore dining, perhaps some exploration, then sleeping on the boat.

"If we wanted to stop for a day, we stopped for a day," he said. "If we wanted to steam day to day, we did."

Williams expected the open-ocean leg through the Gulf of Maine to be rough, with fog, wind, and chop. If it got really unpleasant, he figured, they'd find a secure spot and hang out.

As it turned out, the weather in the gulf was "absolutely perfect. It was sunny and beautiful the whole way to Quebec"—some 1,500 miles of cruising. "We didn't run into the anticipated problems."

The second half of the journey was pretty much inland along locks, canals, lakes, and rivers.

"I wasn't familiar with the lakes and rivers and canals, but you can't get into much trouble there," Williams noted.

For this portion, his wife Debbie came onboard and his friends headed home. "We had a really pleasant time," he said. "We did a lot of cooking and reading. We didn't rush. We ended up doing six hours a day, maybe seven, occasionally eight. But it wasn't every day. We had quite a few lay days, where we did something in the locality of the trip."



From left: John Allard, Jock Williams, and Reg Elwell are long-time cruising buddies. Allard and Elwell accompanied Williams on part of his passage on the Downeast Loop. Photo courtesy Jock Williams

After that relatively protected portion, they ran into rough weather when a hurricane came roaring into the Northeast.

"When we came up on Long Island Sound, the first night it blew about 30 knots," he said. "It's a whole different world. Going back to Maine, I had to be well aware of weather conditions. I was back in the ocean again."

Know your boatyard

Few cruisers own their boatyard to help with preparations. Williams recommended that anyone contemplating an extended cruise find a yard they trust to ensure the boat is safe and well-stocked with equipment like safety gear, spare parts, and tools to work on every system on the boat.

"Another aspect of preparation is psychological," he added. "There's something intrinsic about being on a boat that's func-



Hokulani is a Stanley 36 built at the John Williams Boat Company in 2000. Photo courtesy Jock Williams

tioning well and able to get through any circumstances that might arise without really serious incidents.”

Outfitting *Hokulani* included installing new electronics such as GPS, depth sounder, fish finder, and radar.

Still, Williams is comfortable navigating the old-fashioned way with sextant and chart, and he carried paper charts for the entire passage.

“I’ve navigated quite a few ocean passages with none of the equipment that we used for this trip,” he said. “I put the new equipment in because the equipment I had was 20 years old and wasn’t reliable. But I feel that anybody who is going to do trips of this nature has to have a working sense of the original type of navigation.”

The boat carried standard amenities, like a gas stove, refrigerator, freezer, and hot and cold running water. An Espar diesel fuel heater helped on the colder legs. “That was a big factor and I highly recommend having that onboard,” he said.

Safety wins the day

Safety was paramount. A good first aid kit is a no-brainer. A good practice, he said, is to string a lifeline from bow to stern. Wear a life jacket when going topside and hook it onto the line.

“So if you’re moving around the boat, you’re hooked on,” he said. “We could go forward and if we fell overboard, we’d still be attached to the boat. That’s one of the devices I thought was critical.”

On occasion, when the weather was really inclement, he stacked life jackets where he could easily reach them.

“That way, if someone falls overboard, I can throw one at a time to make a chain so we can follow the boat back to the person,” he said.

His biggest fear was falling.

“It’s tricky in a boat anyway,” he said. “Luckily, I did not fall and neither did Debbie. But we were very careful. Our boat has handrails that are strategically positioned so you can pretty

The great adventure of The Great Loop

By Laurie Schreiber

IN ADDITION to the 2,700-mile Downeast Loop, other mini-loops include:

- Carolina Loop: 150 miles through North Carolina and Virginia, including Dismal Swamp and the Pasquotank River
- Florida Loop: 550 miles through the lower third of Florida from Fort Myers to the Keys
- Triangle Loop: 700 miles through northern New York into Montreal and east to Oswego, including canals, Thousand Islands, and the Hudson River.

The best-known route is the Great Loop, a 6,000-mile system of natural and man-made waterways that encompasses the eastern portion of the United States and part of Canada, according to the Great Loop Cruisers Association in Summerville, South Carolina.

The route includes the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, New York State Canals, Canadian Canals, Great Lakes, inland rivers, and the Gulf of Mexico. There are various route options along the way, but generally it takes cruisers through at least 15 U.S. states and Canadian provinces. The Loop can be started anywhere, but the

The Great Loop in the eastern United States has become increasingly popular among cruisers, who usually take it in segments. Courtesy of Great Loop Cruisers Association



much hang on anywhere you go. If you're in the cockpit area, you have to be careful because that's when you get thrown overboard. But we were protected there, too, because we had the straps and the vests."

He advised that older boaters take care not to overdo things.

"Don't push yourself," he said. "Debbie and I would have dinner and go to bed by probably 8:30. There wasn't much to do anyway. Then I'd get up, make breakfast, and we'd steam ahead."

Another essential? The mate should know how to handle the boat.

"It's not just falling overboard," he said. "The captain could have a stroke or a heart attack, for instance. If the other person doesn't know how to run the boat, they should spend time on the boat running it the way you're going to run it when you're on the trip."

Even with the greatest degree of preparation, issues will arise. When you're offshore, sometimes they just can't be fixed

immediately, he said. For example, his freshwater system developed a leak. "To fix it, you have to take things apart," he said. "I wasn't about to do that. I just lived with it."

When laying out an itinerary for ports to visit, it's important to make sure they have fuel, he said. And it's good to know how things are done in today's internet age. Early in the trip, he discovered that taxis were hard to get in most ports. Fortunately, he navigated his way into the Uber age pretty easily.

Along the way, outstanding experiences included shore visits and charming restaurants. All kinds of whales made a magnificent sight off the Gaspé Peninsula and in the St. Lawrence Seaway. Those sunny, calm days in the Gulf of Maine were extraordinary.

Overall? He's inspired to do more.

"Now, I'm thinking of shipping the boat to France and steaming it down the canals and rivers to the Mediterranean," he said. ■

starting point generally dictates the time of year to begin. For example, those starting from Chicago would begin in the fall to reach Florida before winter. The Loop is usually done counterclockwise so that cruisers go with the current, not against it, on the inland rivers. The association is seeing a trend toward people doing the Great Loop in segments, cruising for a few weeks or months, then returning home to take care of business or other responsibilities, and returning to the boat for another segment when possible.

The concept of cruising the Great Loop as a defined entity is relatively recent, said the association's director, Kimberly Russo.

The earliest instance of someone known to complete the Loop was in the late 1800s.

"But it became a popular idea after 1999, when our founders wrote about it," she said.

That was Ron and Eva Stob, both of them writers and photographers whose extensive excursions included the Great Loop. They formed the America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association in 1999 and subsequently published their book, "Honey, Let's Get a Boat... A Cruising Adventure of America's Great Loop," in 2003. Their activities helped popularize the notion of cruising the Loop, said Russo.

In just the past five years, there's been a whole lot more interest in it, largely because of social media.

"In the past, you might share your trips through letters with folks back home," she said. "Now, with social media, cruisers are posting about their trip and there are hundreds, if not thousands, of people seeing their posts."

It's difficult to say, on any given day, how many folks are actively cruising the Loop.

"Our database says we have 400 people who say they're in progress," she said. "But that doesn't mean continuously. Typically we have about 150 reports of people completing the Loop in a year. That number has been pretty consistent over the past few years. It's still a pretty unique undertaking."

The average boat in the database is 40 feet long; many are smaller or larger. At one time, it was popular to take the Loop by trawler. Today, there are more yachts. The limiting factor for any boat is that it must be able to clear a 19.6-foot bridge on the Illinois River just outside of Chicago.

The majority of Loopers are retirees, although the association is seeing more families and more 20-somethings out there now.

How to prepare?

"We tell people to be comfortable and confident handling their boat and to have an idea of what they're getting themselves into," Russo said. "The organization is all about helping them get prepared—exchanging information with other members, reading up on it, and the rules of the road, so to speak."

Camaraderie among Loopers is often mentioned as one the biggest pleasures of the trip, she said. For scenic views, icons abound.

"Trent-Severn Waterway in Canada is a highlight because of its unique locks, and the people there are amazing," she said. "The sight and experience of arriving in New York Harbor and seeing the Statue of Liberty from aboard your own boat is a big moment for a lot of people." ■

JOHN WILLIAMS BOAT COMPANY

At 80, Boatbuilder Jock Williams Cruises the Down East Loop



JOCK WILLIAMS celebrated turning 80 years old and his retirement by cruising the 2,500-nautical-mile Downeast Loop last summer.

As the owner of John Williams Boat Co. in Hall Quarry, Maine, he was amply prepared. Nautical experience? Plenty. Boat? What could be better than a Stanley 36 designed and built by his yard in 2000? Named *Hokulani*, it was in great condition, needing only upgrades and outfitting. His team performed a meticulous job on varnish, new electronics, life raft, safety gear, connections for medical assistance (if needed), and generally going over all of the systems.

The idea for the trip had been brewing a number of years. After examining routes, he decided to cruise the Downeast Loop—one of various “mini loops” for boaters along with the well-known Great Loop—counter-clockwise. The trip took him and a rotating cast of friends and family up the Maine and Nova Scotia coast, west to the Gaspé peninsula, down the St. Lawrence River to Quebec, then south along the Richelieu River and Cham-



bly Canal to Lake Champlain. The trip across the lake took him to the southern end, where he picked up the 60-mile Champlain Canal to the Hudson River, cruised down to New York, turned the corner, and headed back to Maine.

Wonderful experiences included magnificent whale sightings, stops in charming ports, sunny days on the open Gulf of Maine, and the sense of history traversing the locks, canals, and channels of the St. Lawrence Seaway.

What is next in Williams' travel plans?

The canals and rivers in France beckon!

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