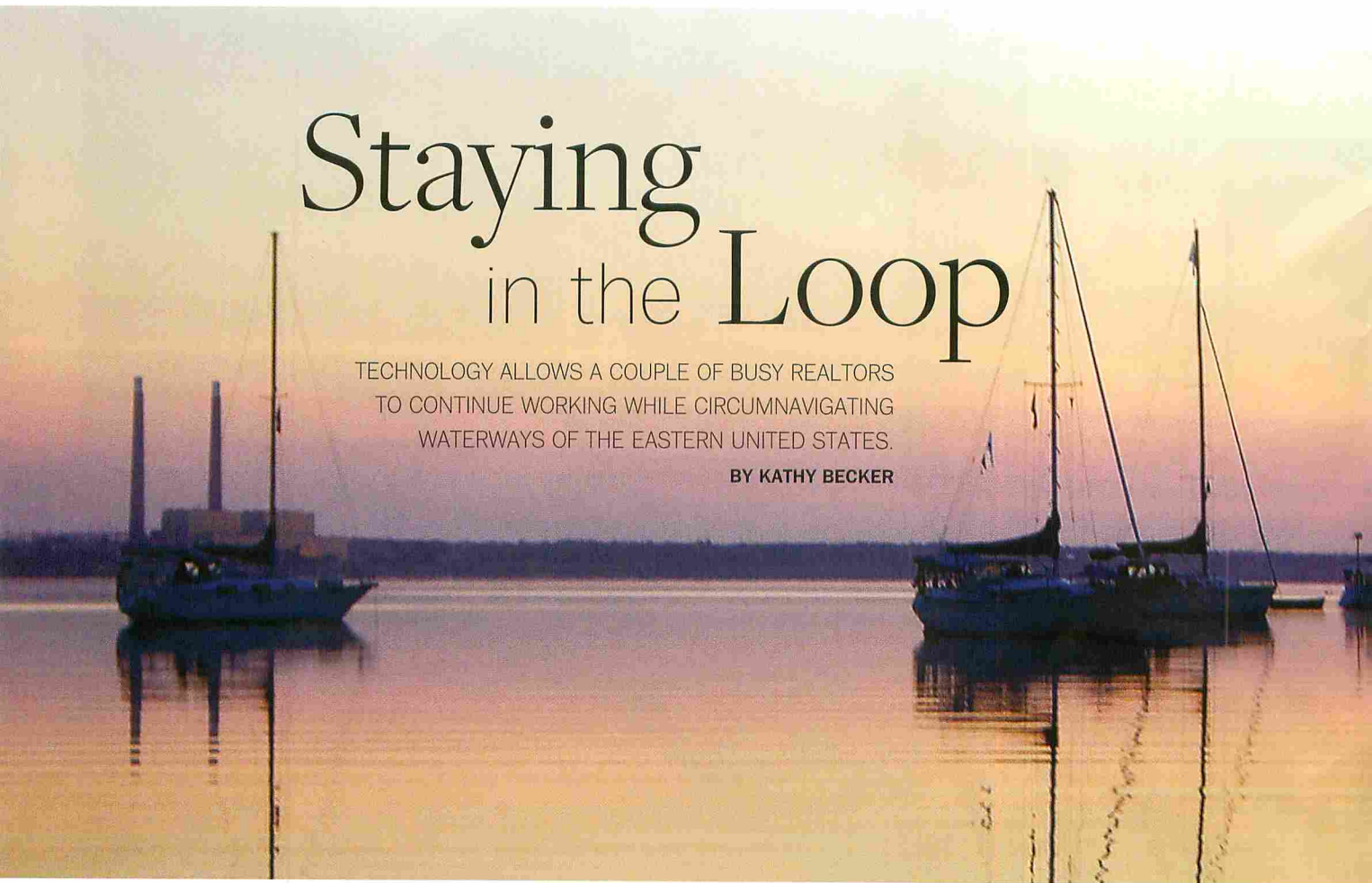


Staying in the Loop

TECHNOLOGY ALLOWS A COUPLE OF BUSY REALTORS
TO CONTINUE WORKING WHILE CIRCUMNAVIGATING
WATERWAYS OF THE EASTERN UNITED STATES.

BY KATHY BECKER



Chip Harris and Michele Peppe have a message for anyone thinking about doing something monumental this new year. “Seize the day,” Harris says. “This isn’t a dress rehearsal,” Peppe says.

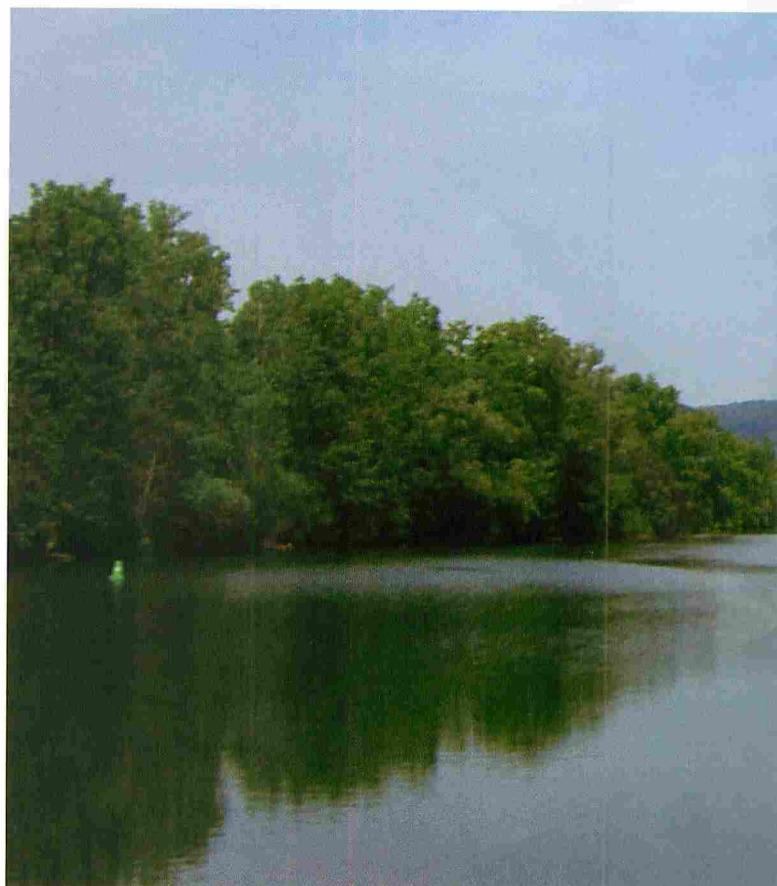
They practiced what they preach in 2007 when they left their Naples dock to travel 31 months and nearly 7,000 miles on the Great Loop, which circumnavigates Eastern North America, all the while maintaining their busy real estate business.

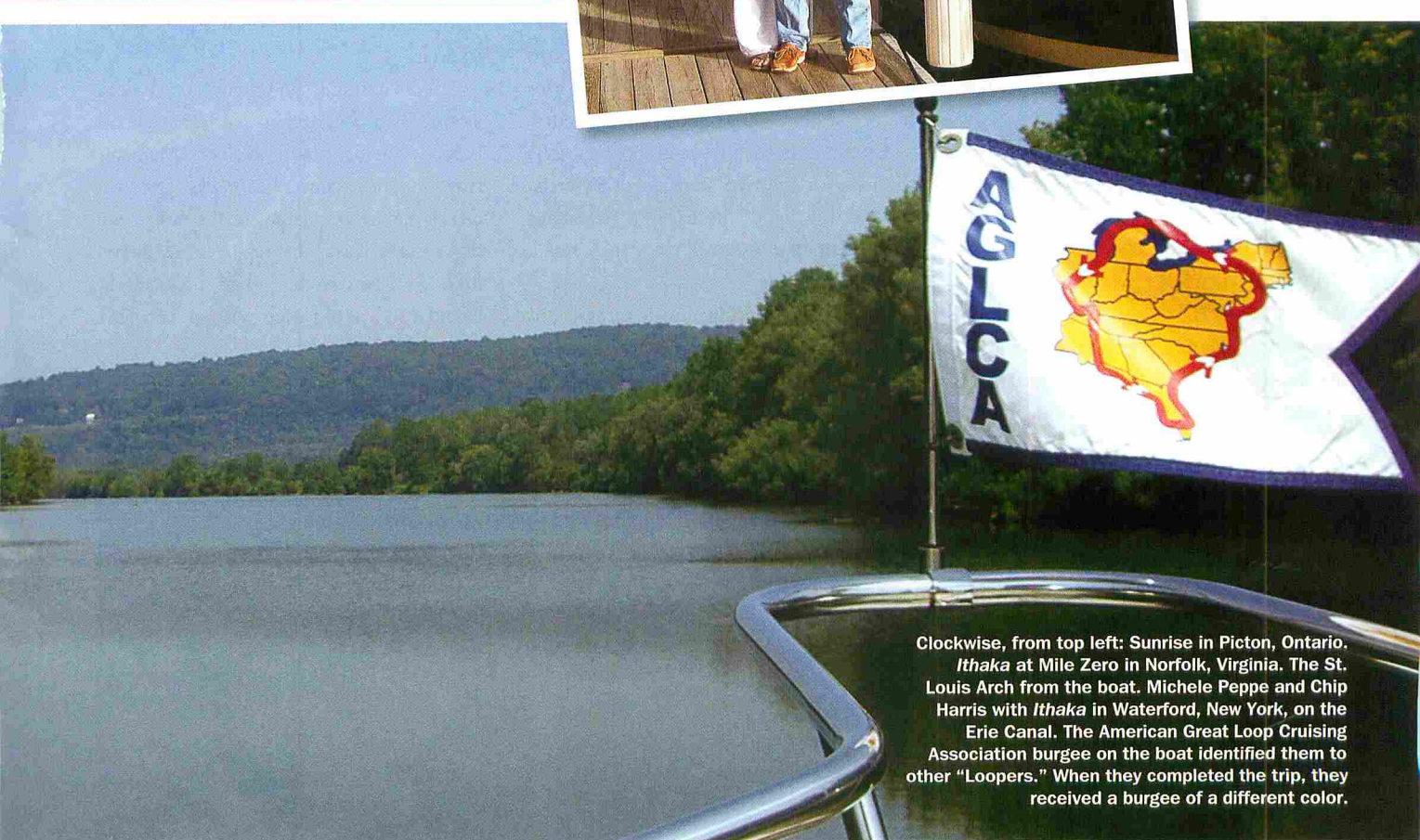
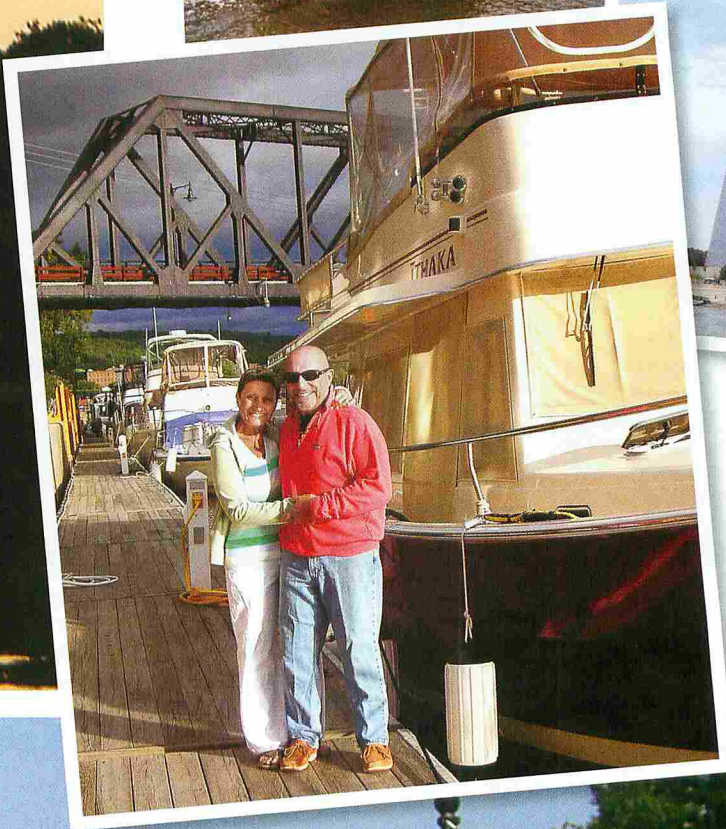
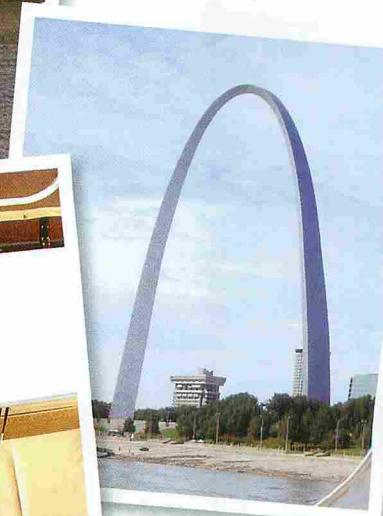
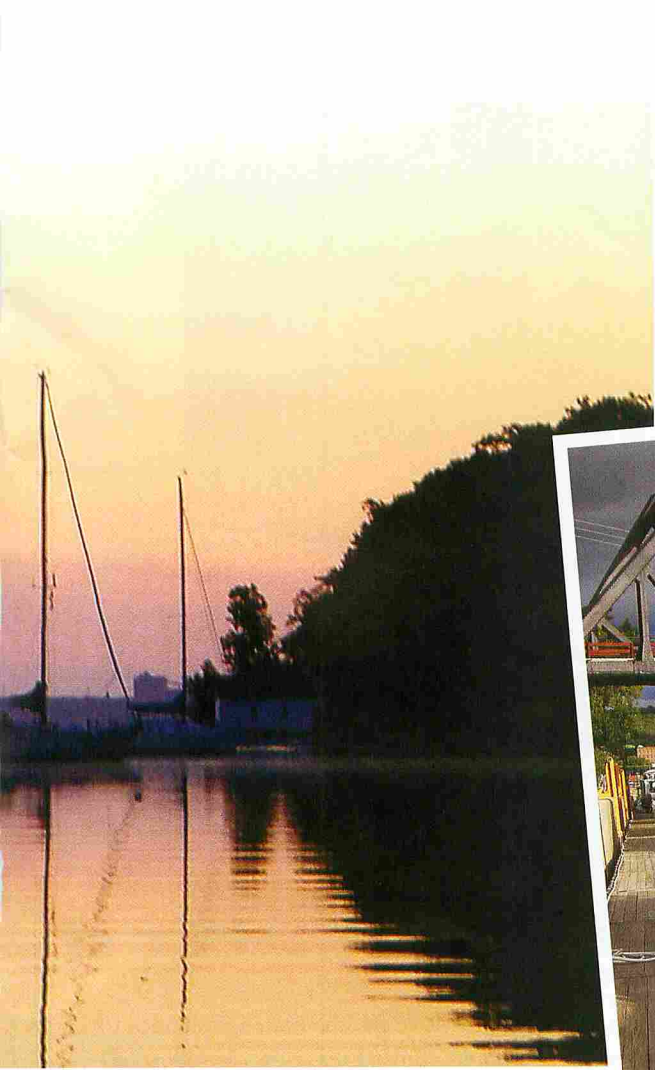
They weren’t on the water all the time for those months; instead they took up to 14 weeks at a time to go about 40 to 50 miles a day during the summer or early fall. At the end of each leg, they would dry-dock the boat until they could pick up where they left off the next year.

Harris and Peppe stayed in touch with the business and customers via the Internet, and had staff who stayed behind to handle the business, including two of Harris’s daughters. “We had great staff supporting us,” Harris says. “I don’t think we lost any income, or that our customers were unhappy.”

“Many of our customers were thrilled for us,” Peppe says. “We were very hands-on with the business, and it was great networking.”

The America’s Great Loop Cruisers’ Association hosts twice-a-year gatherings for boaters who have completed or are contemplating the trip. Among the 200 boaters at a 2009





Clockwise, from top left: Sunrise in Picton, Ontario. *Ithaka* at Mile Zero in Norfolk, Virginia. The St. Louis Arch from the boat. Michele Peppe and Chip Harris with *Ithaka* in Waterford, New York, on the Erie Canal. The American Great Loop Cruising Association burgee on the boat identified them to other "Loopers." When they completed the trip, they received a burgee of a different color.



Ithaka at Bobby's Fish Camp on the Tombigbee River in Alabama; Captain Harris gives thumbs up upon "crossing her wake" in Gordon Pass on the return to Naples.

gathering, Harris and Peppe were the only ones who worked while completing the trip. "We didn't meet anyone else who did it and worked," Peppe says. "Most were in their 60s, 70s and 80s, but all with a sense of adventure."

Harris is surprised more people don't do the loop. "This country is so amazing," he says. "But people don't take the time to see it."

A typical day while traveling would start at 5 a.m., with Harris and Peppe working for a couple of hours maintaining the website. Yet they didn't rush the voyage to keep up with business, and they found time to

meet friends and family as they traveled.

"We tried to go slowly and enjoy stops at different cities," Harris says. Along the Hudson River, they took three weeks to travel 150 miles by water, visiting favorite historical sites. They're both history buffs.

They are both also avid boaters, but the idea for the trip started with Harris. "It was my fault," he says. "I've always been fascinated by travel by boat. It was a Bucket List thing."

Instead of waiting until retiring to pursue their dream, which is the case for most boaters who complete the Loop, they decided to go while they are both young

and healthy, and the route is still open to boaters. "Inland waterways are filling in," Harris says. "In time, you will not be able to do it."

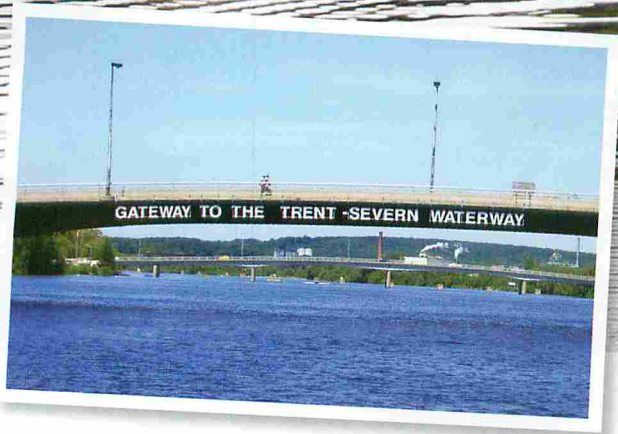
Still, deciding to go was not a rash decision. They researched different boats before buying their 40-foot Mainship trawler. They named her *Ithaka*, after the Greek poem by Constantine P. Cavafy: "But don't in the least hurry the journey. Better it last for years, so that when you reach the island you are old, rich with all you have gained on the way."

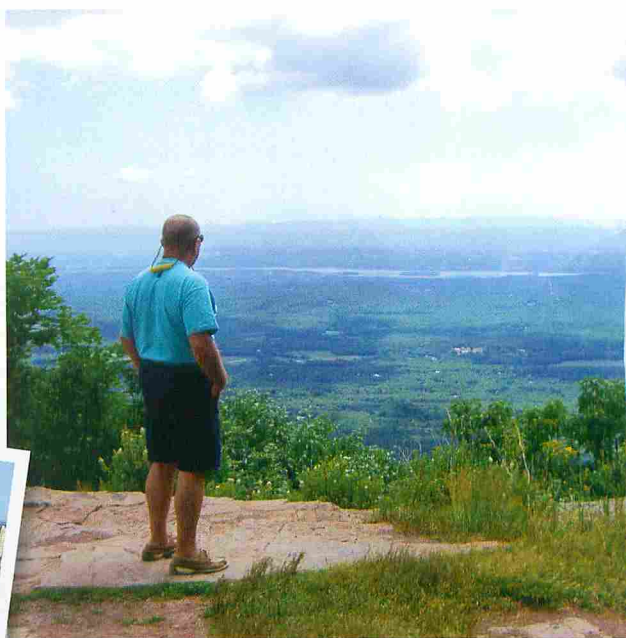
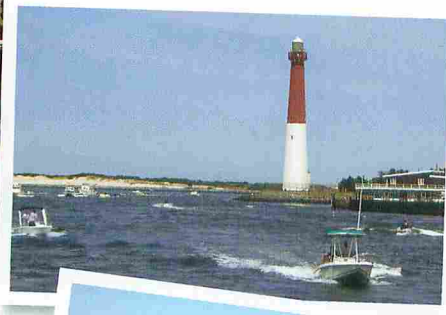
Harris got his captain's license, ensuring he was up to speed on safety and navigation

The living quarters during the trip; Michele Peppe sorts out the charts as the boat's first mate.

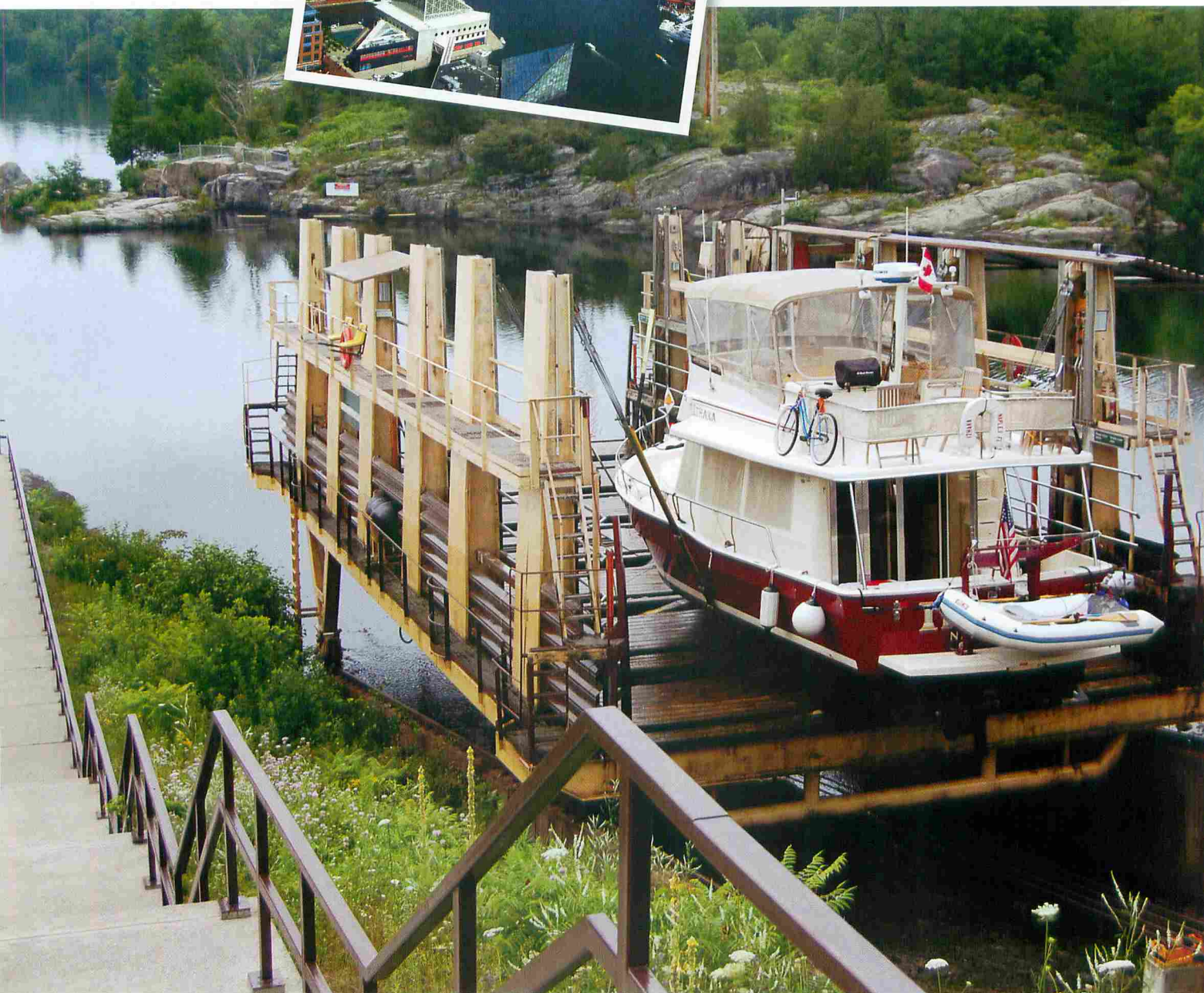
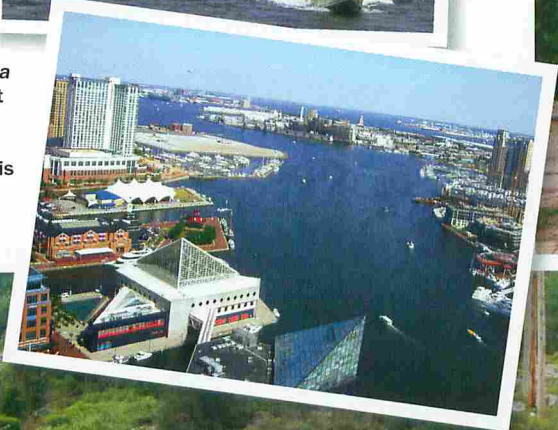


Entering one of more than
100 locks on the trip.
Bottom: The Trent-Severn
Waterway in Canada.





Clockwise, from top left: *Ithaka* going to drydock after the first leg of the trip. Lighthouse at Barnegat Inlet, New Jersey. Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Harris looks at the Hudson River Valley. *Ithaka* going over the road on the train rail.





Ithaka at anchor in Georgian Bay, Canada.

issues. They took practice trips on their boat for three years to learn the instruments and become comfortable before they began the first leg. “We are goal-oriented, and we’ll do whatever it takes to get there,” Harris says.

“We are always thinking ahead,” Peppe says. “The planning is half the fun.”

As they prepared, they learned they are compatible boaters. “In life, Chip and I are equals,” Peppe says. “We have such respect for each other. But on a boat, there’s only one captain. The last decision has to be his. You don’t second-guess; you just can’t.”

So when they were docking or negotiating one of more than 100 locks on the trip, Peppe would address him as captain to the surprise of friends. “We are great boat mates,” she says. “We lived in 400 square

feet with one head. We’ve got great hand signals and finish each others’ sentences.”

Still, Peppe found herself sometimes homesick for children and grandchildren, so she posted a blog (DiscoveringIthaka.blogspot.com) of their progress. Highlights included watching fireworks in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, as well as seeing monuments like the St. Louis Arch from the water. They saw the monarch butterfly migration and white pelicans. It was also amazing to travel for hours without seeing another boat, human or building. “In some places there was nothing but God and what He put there,” Harris says.

Travel wasn’t always easy. In the harbor in Annapolis, Maryland, they got caught in some small storms that came up quickly and didn’t show on radar. Harris

was able to order Peppe below in time for five to six minutes of 60-mph winds that blew out the zippers and windows of the boat’s cover. Another time, Peppe slipped and fell from the top of the boat to the bottom, breaking several ribs and sending her to the emergency room. When the paper map and the electronic chart did not agree, they had to determine their own course in unfamiliar waters.

“There were three or four incidents,” Harris says. “But it’s more dangerous to drive a boat from Keewaydin to Naples on a Sunday afternoon than this trip.”

When they returned to Florida waters in late 2009, dolphins began to play in their wake. “It was really cool and spiritual,” Peppe says. “Every day was a new adventure. You can’t help but be happy when you are on a boat.” ♦