



YOUR BOAT *OR* MINE?



CUSTOMIZED TRAWLER TRAINING WITH A SMILE

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINE ALHAMBRA

“If you’re not having fun, why do it?” Alyse Caldwell asked me as she described the wide array of marine services that she and her husband, Chris, offer. It’s a motto that they both live by, and it shows.

I was first introduced to the Caldwells, owners of Captain Chris Yacht Services, at our Ft. Lauderdale Trawler Fest in early 2010. They were new to our lineup of Trawler Fest University instructors; John Wooldridge, *PMM*’s editor-in-chief, had recommended them after he met the USCG 100-ton master’s-licensed Caldwells during a yacht delivery they were conducting from Ft. Myers to St. Petersburg, Florida.

As I observed the couple present their two-day TFU course, “Building Cruising Confidence as a Couple,” from the start I noticed that they were upbeat, professional, and self-sufficient. As I watched on, I was impressed by their teaching skills—they seemed to have a system in place that worked well. They separated the students into two groups, and then had each student take turns in the roles of captain and crew. The guidance they provided to their students and the thoroughness with which they covered their course material stood out. Throughout the Trawler Fest weekend, I saw the couple interact with students, Trawler Fest staff, and other exhibitors and attendees, and I wondered how they could be *that* happy *all* the time.

So when I had the opportunity to visit the Caldwells on their home turf of Ft. Pierce, Florida, I jumped at the chance. I wanted to learn more about how their private, hands-on “Trawler Training” business worked, but I have to admit, I secretly wanted to know something else: How did this married couple live, work, and own a business together and not manage to kill each other? And really, could they always be this high-energy?

THE BACKGROUND

The main focus of Captain Chris Yacht Services is to train couples or individuals either aboard the Caldwells’ boat (*Sandy Hook*, a Gulfstar 44) or aboard the students’ boat, wherever it may be located. In addition to trawler training, their services also include yacht delivery, absentee-owner responsibilities, and light maintenance. Let’s just say, it’s a rare occasion when this couple has a full day off.

My visit to Ft. Pierce took place in late June, and for a few days I would be calling the V-berth of *Sandy Hook* my home while shadowing a couple’s trawler training course.

The students, Claudia and Kenny Higginbotham, were delayed due to a late flight and would not be arriving in time for dinner, but they were expected later that evening. The bad news was that the training would get off to a late start, but the good news was that this allowed me some one-on-one time with Chris and Alyse to ask them the many questions I had.

How did you meet? How did Captain Chris Yacht Services come about? Is it strange for you to constantly have strangers aboard your boat?

After I bombarded them with questions, they gave me the full story of how it all began. Chris used to run charters on his family’s scuba diving boat in the Gulf of Mexico and had his captain’s license by age 18. Alyse spent most summers aboard her family’s 31-foot cabin cruiser on the Jersey Shore. Alyse met Chris in a scuba diving shop in New Orleans, and a few years later they fell in love and got hitched!



After they were married, the Caldwells enjoyed their 34-foot Downeast lobsterboat so much that they found themselves spending half the week living aboard with their two Labradors. *Sea Bound* was a tight fit for all four of them, so in 1995 they sold the house and bought their current boat, *Sandy Hook*.

At that point Chris and Alyse were living aboard full time, cruising for long weekends and extended vacations, and for the next five years they continued their careers in New Orleans (Chris in engineering sales and Alyse as a hospital nursing director). Planning a one-year sabbatical to cruise in 2000, they sold the cars, got rid of the business suits, and set out to do the Great Loop. After that year went by, they decided that life was too short and they couldn't get back to New

Chris and Alyse thought their services would do just that. Training aboard *Sandy Hook* was a natural progression for their business for those who wanted to learn about life aboard, but didn't yet own a trawler.

TIME FOR TRAINING

So here we were—one couple ready to teach aboard their boat, another couple eager to learn firsthand about the cruising lifestyle, and me, ready to observe it all and still find the answer to the million-dollar question: How do the Caldwells get along so well?

I slept well in the V-berth and awoke to finally meet Claudia and Kenny. Alyse's multicourse breakfast filled the boat with a glorious aroma. My first lesson: Just because we were on a boat, didn't mean the galley



Left: Alyse and Claudia learning how to properly tie a line for storage. Who said learning can't be fun? Right: Chris and Alyse teach Kenny and Claudia the right way to use a chart and how to plot a course to our final destination.

Orleans. They observed other people living the dream and thought, "Maybe it's our time."

Alyse acquired her captain's license in 2001 and both found seasonal jobs in the Chesapeake driving water taxis. The couple lived as snowbirds for a few more years, and as funds dwindled, they picked up odd jobs helping other boaters with maintenance and boat delivery. Just when they thought their fun was over and it was time to get back to the real world, fate stepped in.

In August 2005 the Caldwells bought plane tickets to New Orleans to scope out jobs, housing, and a place to dock *Sandy Hook*. Scheduled to land a few days after Hurricane Katrina hit, the airport was closed and the couple had to reconsider their plans. Cruising for a few months in the Bahamas helped them think things through and before they knew it, they came up with a business plan to start Captain Chris Yacht Services.

While observing other cruisers, they saw that some owners weren't comfortable handling their new boats and often paid high labor fees for basic maintenance because they had never been taught to do it themselves.

was limiting. This meal was hardly the cereal and milk I had expected. Alyse taught us that advance meal preparation was a must on board so that the cook and the crew could share their meals together. We enjoyed "Sausage Pinwheels" (sausage wrapped in crescent rolls, sliced, and baked) and "Breakfast in a Bucket" (ham as a liner in a muffin pan, baked with an egg in the center).

As we talked during breakfast, I knew immediately that Claudia and Kenny were going to be ideal cruising companions. Newlyweds for a little over four months, the couple lived in Arizona and were very much in love. I couldn't help but let their positive energy and warmth rub off on me. They were anxious to get things started, and so was I.

Kenny owned a collection of diners across the United States and also had his private pilot's license. Claudia was a Southwest Airlines flight attendant. Kenny was no stranger to boats and knew that his future plans included living aboard and eventually cruising full time. Claudia loved the idea of being on the water but didn't have much experience with boats.



When Claudia and Kenny met a little over a year ago, one of the first things Kenny asked Claudia was how she liked the idea of living aboard. Claudia replied, "I'm your girl." They were married shortly after and now had hired Chris and Alyse to give them a taste of what life aboard as a couple was all about.

While Kenny was ready to take the next step to living aboard, Claudia wanted to get more comfortable with the idea. Although she loved cruising, she wanted to make sure she could still enjoy creature comforts, such as entertaining, and that she wouldn't be giving up too much in the transition to life aboard.

Kenny and Claudia both had ideas of what they were looking for in their dream boat. Kenny wanted a seaworthy cruiser with a nice engine room that would be comfortable to cruise, and Claudia wanted plenty of room to entertain, an aft deck to enjoy sunset happy hours, and three staterooms so their families could visit whenever they wanted.

I knew Kenny had grown up on boats and had always dreamt of a liveaboard lifestyle, but when I asked the Higginbothams about what brought them to the idea of living aboard together, their answer echoed those I've heard so many times before from couples looking to simplify their lives and go cruising. Claudia found herself out shopping thinking, "Do I need this? Where will I put it?" Tired of accumulating *things* they said they were ready to consolidate.

After our hearty breakfast, it was time to get to work! After all, we had a late start and Chris and Alyse were adamant about giving the couple the most learning time they could because of their delayed arrival. We started with the basics.

Chris and Alyse showed us different resources to prepare for our trip, including navigating our course with charts, marina guides, and facility guides. Of course, the most important rule was instilled in our minds: everyone should carry paper charts. We talked about what we'd be learning over the next few days and did some basic charting to our destination for that evening, Peck Lake, just a few miles down the ICW from St. Lucie Inlet. We covered basic onboard procedures and of course, safety, a vital topic in Chris' book.

The next step was getting to know the boat so we were comfortable enough to cast off. The guys went up on the flybridge and the ladies went to check the lines. True to their teaching style, Chris and Alyse made sure that these roles were traded off so both captain and first mate knew what each duty was like.

After a few hours of learning about the systems and maintenance procedures aboard *Sandy Hook* we were ready to head out into the ICW. We all took turns at the helm as Chris and Alyse stood by. When Claudia and Kenny had questions, Chris and Alyse would not only answer them, but also included their own stories

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Chris Caldwell



Top: It wasn't all hard work. Alyse, Claudia, and I sit back as the men take the helm down the beautiful ICW. Middle: Our first morning at anchor, we enjoy Alyse's famous "Breakfast in a Bucket." Alyse spoiled us with her yummy recipes. Above: Claudia, Kenny, and Chris on Hobe Sound Wildlife Refuge. This stop gave us a chance to stretch our sea legs.

and experiences, which added a personal touch. Tips and tricks for trip planning, maneuvering, and crew communication that they'd learned from their years cruising and living aboard were very helpful and something that we could never get from a textbook. We never felt like a question was silly, or that they were tired of instructing. They were there to help us and truly provide the best experience they could.

When we finally arrived at Peck Lake after about a four-hour trip that brought us through the infamous "Crossroads" and other beautiful parts of the ICW, we planned to take the dinghy over to shore to explore the Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge. After we discussed anchoring techniques, Kenny, Claudia, Chris, and Alyse worked on bringing the dinghy down. Again, Chris and Alyse stressed the safety factor. The couple certainly went above and beyond in the safety department and I felt safe and secure to be cruising with them.

When I glanced over at Kenny and Claudia, I could see they had a great love for life and they were enjoying every minute of this experience. Although they were taking in what they were learning, they also enjoyed sitting back and taking in the cruising life. As we landed on the wildlife refuge we walked over to the other side of the island to see the ocean. Small, roped-off areas warned us not to disturb the turtles during mating season, which reminded us that we were guests on this island. Peaceful moments like this made long days on the water well worth it.

We came back aboard *Sandy Hook* just in time for happy hour, which, after a long day of learning and cruising, we were more than ready for. In a perfect summer breeze, we sipped cocktails on the aft deck and enjoyed great conversation as Alyse whipped up another gourmet meal. Another trick of the trade we learned was to save everything (as far as food is concerned). According to Alyse, you can make an entire meal with leftovers.

After a relaxing evening of great food and even better conversation, we went up to the flybridge to read the radar and see how we were sitting in the anchorage. I think Chris and Alyse could've kept teaching, but eventually we students were too tired to absorb any more information and retired to our berths. As I closed my eyes I wondered to myself: How do they do it and where do they get their energy? Thorough teaching is an understatement with these two.

Before we headed home the next morning we decided to take another trip to the beach to see the ocean one last time. I was having such a great time with these couples—their zest for life was inspiring.

Chris and Alyse truly enjoy what they are doing. Like their marriage, their company is a partnership and they work well together. They both fit the roles of captain and crew, and I could tell this was a completely equal relationship.



All but Chris pose on the stern of *Sandy Hook*. We had a great time getting to know each other on our classroom on the water!

FINAL THOUGHTS

Our cruise back to the marina would mark our last day of training, so we got out the maps to plot our course back to Harbour Isle at Hutchison Island Marina. We would be traveling 27 miles at 6.5 knots. On the way back we discussed the rules of the road, signals, and other helpful tips from Capts. Chris and Alyse about navigating. Again, everyone had a turn at the helm and an opportunity to practice docking in our slip.

Toward the end of our day I pulled Kenny and Claudia aside and asked them what they thought of their training experience. Kenny said the navigation tips that Chris and Alyse offered were very useful to him. Claudia, who said she was starting at ground zero, said she hoped she remembered all the useful information she learned over the past few days and to apply it when they finally found the boat of their dreams.

Every experience with Chris and Alyse will be unique, since they really do tailor every course to the wants and needs of the client. One couple will want more hands-on experience than the other. Some couples want to learn 100 percent of the time, and some want to sit back and enjoy the ride. Chris and Alyse are flexible and prepared for all the different learning styles of their students.

Early in the cruise, I wondered whether it was better to train on your own boat or on the Caldwell's boat. After observing the course, I gained better insight. If you don't already own a boat, training on the instructor's vessel may give you the opportunity to observe characteristics that you like or dislike and features that you want to look for or go without on your future boat. If you own a boat already, you may want to train on your own vessel in order to learn more about it. Either way, you'll be sure to get your money's worth.

As of this writing, Claudia and Kenny Higginbotham are still looking for their dream boat, traveling to Trawler Fest events across the country, in search of the perfect liveaboard cruiser. Chris and Alyse are still actively teaching at Trawler Fests, including stepping in at the last minute to present, or participating whenever they can to showcase their skills and do what they love.

Chris and Alyse are a duo that surely work well together, and they credit that to knowing each other's strengths and weaknesses. And, as for my investigation into whether they could really be that chipper all the time? Well, they proved me wrong alright. 

For more information on Capts. Chris and Alyse Caldwell's trawler training and other services, go to their website www.captainchrisyachtservices.com.