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NOVEMBER 2015

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Boat Show

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Friends with Boats

Yacht charters and boat clubs are great ways to get out on the water without having to worry about the boat back on land.



LITTLE MORE THAN a year ago, Mark Husk worked as an executive for a healthcare company. Then he quit, and he and his wife, Nancy, bought a boat. If you've ever listened to a Jimmy Buffett album, you've likely heard a similar story.

"My wife and I have been boaters for about 25 or 30 years and decided we were going to leave corporate America and follow our dreams," he says.

But the Husks didn't just have tropical dreams, they had a plan. They now own My Yacht Experience, a business based

around their 44' Sea Ray. They charter it with two-person crew for anything from evening Intracoastal cruises to three-day excursions to the Bahamas.

"We enjoyed (boating) so much that we thought we'd share the love with others," Husk says.

In doing so, they joined a segment of the marine industry that offers unique travel opportunities. Not everybody wants to take a cruise, but not everybody has the boat or the technical know-how to navigate, say, a weekend trip to the Bahamas. Alongside chartering, boat clubs are another growing

option for boaters who want to go out on smaller craft while also obeying the ancient Florida wisdom that says a boat is good, but a friend with a boat can be better.

In My Yacht Experience's first year, most business has been half-day or day trips around Fort Lauderdale. Multi-day trips to the Bahamas tend to come from second-time customers, Husk says – people who had a good time cruising the Intra-coastal and now want more.

Their primary Bahamas trip is a three-day, two-night jaunt with a stay in Bimini. Trips take in places such as Honeymoon Harbor, the popular Gun Cay locale known for snorkeling and scuba diving where you can swim with stingrays. Another popular stop is the wreck of the SS Sapona, the partially above-water shipwreck that's a popular dive site.

"There's just a lot of really cool places to visit," Husk says. Particularly when you can get to places you can't reach in a car.

So there's the sea and hard-to-find nature, but some luxury is involved.

"Each charter comes with a captain and a mate, and the mate is generally more of a stewardess – giving them a pampering experience," Husk says.

"We're trying to create something that hits a market in between that gives people who've got a little bit of money the opportunity to have a private experience."

Of course for some people looking for a different boating experience, boat size isn't as important as the ability to get be-



hind the wheel. For those people, boat clubs can be a popular option. Freedom Boat Club is a nationwide organization that recently expanded to South Florida.

"We make boating affordable," president and CEO John Giglio says. "Boating's a fun sport that we want everybody to be able to take advantage."

You can take a Freedom boat out overnight, but not out of the country.

"We do offer extended hours and overnight use but there is a mileage restriction," Giglio says. "Boats cannot go more than 25 miles from their home port."

That said, with several clubs in the state and a number of state parks and beaches within that radius, opportunities still exist for boating vacations closer to home. Freedom also offers different kinds of boats, from close-to-home pontoon and deck boats to boats better for overnight use or the open ocean, including sailboats.

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"For those people who want to go offshore, they can certainly do that," Giglio says. "We have a secondary training program for them (as well as a sailboat class.) When they join the club, they're not joining for the one boat."

That secondary course is in addition to the mandatory four-hour course for new members, which includes two-hours on a boat with an instructor.

"We do not allow a member to get on a boat before they're trained," Giglio says. "Many people think driving a boat's like driving a car, which it absolutely is not."

Freedom loses some members to boat ownership, but Giglio doesn't mind.

"For a lot of people who are new to boating, boat clubs are a phenomenal opportunity," he says. "It's a phenomenal opportunity to see if they like it with low financial risk.

It's not a great investment to buy a boat - it's only a great investment if you're going to use it."

About 20 percent of their members leave to buy a boat.

"We're fine with that," he says. "As long as they had a positive experience with the club, they're going to tell their friends about it. We have no shortage of members around the country."

For yacht charter companies, that's less of a problem - yacht ownership is never going to be for everybody. Husk recognizes he's giving

people an experience they've likely not had before, and he's willing to tailor it. Although he also explains concepts to people who might not be familiar with distance over the sea. For example, he's been asked about trips to Key West. He'd gladly do one, but people often don't realize that's 150 miles on the water as opposed to 55 to the Bahamas.

"You'll spend a lot less money and have a lot more fun (going to the Bahamas), he says. "As long as you have a passport." ○

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