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CONTENTS

Regina Bendix and Orvar Löfgren

Double Homes, Double Lives? 7

Johanna Rolshoven

The Temptations of the Provisional. Multilocality as a Way of Life 17

Marius Risi

Vacation Home Culture at 1,000 Meters. The Thirty-Something Generation in Engelberg, Switzerland 26

John Bendix

Refugee's Refuge 35

Magnus Berg

Generations and Transnational Homes. Nazim goes: 39

Daniel Miller

Why the Best Furniture Goes to the House You Can't Live in 45

Maria Alzaga

The Travelling Lives of Circus Artists. Home and Homelessness in a Nomadic Life 51

Martina Kleinert

Homes Afloat. Observations on Long-Term Cruising Yachts 57

Anne-Marie Palm

Waking up in Two Nations 67

Nik Luka

Waterfront Second Homes in the Central Canada Woodlands. Images, Social Practice, and Attachment to Multiple Residency 71

Anne Leonora Blaakilde

"We Live Ten Years Longer Here." Elderly Danish Migrants Living on the Costa del Sol 88

Klaus Schriewer and Irene Encinas Berg

Being Misleading About Where One Resides. European Affluence Mobility and
Registration Patterns 98

Daniella Seidl

Breaking Out into the Everyday. German Holiday-Home Owners in Italy 107

Deborah Kapchan

A Colonial Relation Not My Own. Coming Home to Morocco and France 115

Jonathan H. Shannon

Village Homes 118

Eleftheria Deltsou

Second Homes and Tourism in a Greek Village. A Travelogue 124

Ulrich Mai

Paradise Lost and Regained. German Second Home Owners in Mazury, Poland 134

Glenn Bowman

At Home Abroad. The Field Site as Second Home 140

Homes Afloat

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By

Martina Kleinert

E-article

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HOMES AFLOAT

Observations on Long-Term Cruising Yachts

Martina Kleinert

A summer house at the seaside might already be considered as some sort of maritime second home. Yet the idea of a genuine (second) home near the sea – or rather ‘at sea’ – seems to be realised by ‘yachties’ – offshore or bluewater sailors who are cruising the Seven Seas for leisure. If so, this raises not only the question of the long-term sailors’ concept of home in general, but also draws attention to the materiality of the yachts themselves. When and how does a yacht become a true ‘home’? In my attempt to answer this question, I will point out the peculiar physical nature of sailing boats as moving dwellings and take a closer look at the interior of some cruising yachts, presented against the background of common notions of ‘home’ expressed by yachties.

The Setting

The main source is recent fieldwork among German-speaking bluewater sailors that took place on the North Island of New Zealand.¹ Many overseas cruising yachts retreat there during the cyclone season in the Southern Pacific (November to April). Yet it is as difficult to speak of ‘the’ yachtie in general, as it is to generalize about their homes afloat. There are countless ways to sail around the world, numerous kinds of crews and types of boat, and the duration of a circumnavigation varies as well. Nowadays one meets predominantly middle-aged, retired couples on 35 to 45 foot yachts (10 to 15 metres), and the following observations are mainly based on this group.

What the yachts have in common is that they were located in a marina for several weeks, even months,

either berthed or moored farther out. That indicates the financial background of these yachties; they can afford the hefty marina fees. Many yachties are truly long-term seafarers who have been sailing for more than ten years, having left home with the intention to actually sail around the world. All take annual ‘breaks’, more or less regularly, and return to Germany (Austria or Switzerland), visiting family and friends. Some of the yachties still own a house in their home country, which they return to on these occasions, while others have sold properties to be able to afford a yacht and cruising. In both cases, one can ask how the yachts function as a first or second home.

The fundamental contrast to (most) land-based homes is the independent mobility of a sailing boat. Most yachties emphasise the personal ‘freedom’ granted by their distinct lifestyle, the unlimited choice of coming, going or staying put. Some yachties described their boat as their ‘snail-shell’, feeling total independence to mean having everything they need on board and being able to move on whenever they like. It should not be forgotten that this cruising freedom and independence do have certain constraints, above all, weather conditions and visa regulations. Interesting enough, even yachties who – at least temporarily – become quite ‘sedentary’ by staying for weeks and months in the same spot, enjoying the conveniences of a marina, for example, set great store by this freedom. Besides focusing on independence, the yachties’ description of their way of travelling and living contains the con-

cept of self-development and, to a certain extent, a willingness to take risks.

If one looks at the travel patterns of today's blue-water sailors, these are mostly older sailors who more often than not are undertaking a circumnavigation in retirement. So it makes sense to ask whether yachties can be seen as 'transnational retirement migrants' rather than adventurous travellers. They are in search of a self-defined, high-quality lifestyle, with an explicit accent placed on self-awareness and self-development. Clearly migrants of choice, as well as migrants of plenty with no economic reason to move, they can be characterized as 'space-pioneers' who have challenged the norm of dealing with home and residence. Local and social integration in their societies of origin, the familiarity of 'home', has been exchanged for the amenities of a milder climate and its possibilities in the unknown abroad (Nokielski 2005). There are reasons why the vast majority of cruisers sail around the world with the trade winds and thus spend most of their time in tropical regions.

Notions of 'Home' for Yachties

In contrast to those retirement migrants who oscillate between their society of origin and the society at their new place of residence, yachties additionally, and primarily, belong to the cruising community. Long-term sailors cultivate social relationships both with family and friends left behind in their home-country and with new-found friends 'away', which in a sense represents another 'home'. Since fellow yachties constitute the most stable circle of acquaintances while underway, the cruising community plays the part of a reliable social environment, providing mutual trust and understanding in contrast to the transient nature of 'cruising' itself. What the cruising community has in common is cruising and owning a yacht.

The lifestyle of any long-term cruise is truly centred on the yacht, which becomes a home afloat, both as an 'emotional home' and as a 'house'. It provides the 'freedom' to be and act as one likes, responsible only for oneself, and to a certain extent being self-sustaining.

Several of my interviewees over 60, concerned about health issues, did keep domiciles back in Germany in case of emergency and in case the circumnavigation would have to be broken off. Both young and old alike tended to refer to their often month-long stays in Germany as a kind of 'vacation', as holidays from cruising. This way, an inversion seems to occur, as a former residence in their home country becomes a sort of second home, reserved for recreation and family visits.

Whenever ashore, whether on short trips, on 'home-leave', or staying for months at a previous home, it is the yacht that is regarded as the real, primary, proper home. "It is always the boat that is meant when we say: Let's go home", one of my interviewees put it. However, this strong emotional commitment to the yacht seems to be effective only for the years of travelling, or – to be more precise – as long as the possibility of sailing on around the world is still an option. On returning to the home country or settling more or less permanently elsewhere, most yachties abandon their yacht as a residence and move back on land. The yacht is either sold or kept for shorter sailing trips.

Nearly all the yachties I met said they feel absolutely 'at home' (*Zuhause*) on their boat, but most of them added that they also think of Germany as 'home' (*Heimat*), differentiating strongly between the two terms. The perception of a seafarer's home becomes even more transient, inasmuch as many bluewater sailors also see an anchorage or port of call as 'home', even although this place changes more or less constantly. This identification is raised to a higher level in returning visits to specific countries and/or anchorages and marinas; each time they became more familiar and more of a temporary home. During my stay at the Bay of Islands, I met several people who could be described as 'returning visitors'. They commuted every season between the Pacific Islands and a certain marina in New Zealand (a 'home away from home' where they even returned to the same favourite berth for years in a row), and left from there on their annual 'home-leave' to Germany.

The 'home' of yachties thus manifests itself above all in their physical dwelling, in the form of their

yacht. At the same time, it is also manifested to a certain extent in various geographic sites, some of which even become a sort of familiar 'second home'. Then there is a third 'home' in social relationships.

In certain respects, one can think of late modern yachties roaming the oceans as 'nomads of the sea'. Some even call themselves that way, in one case even name their yacht 'Nomad', and like nomads, their housing always moves with them. At a different level, they take their home with them by recreating routines of everyday home life while travelling. As with long-term camping tourists (cf. White & White 2007), the days are filled with the same mundane events that constitute a day for non-tourists or for those who live in sedentary households.

Long-term cruises similarly have their routines of domesticity, work and leisure. The main occupations are not only keeping the boat seaworthy, but making ongoing improvements and customizing various features for personal needs and preferences, as well as provisioning it. Some of the 'returning' yachties I met in New Zealand had established routines as to where and when to overhaul their boat in the course of a year, as well as weekly *jour fixes*. Quite a number of German yachties in the Bay of Islands area made a regular habit of going to the farmer's market in Kerikeri on Sunday, meeting at 'Reva's' in Whangarei for the sailor's 'Happy Hour' on Tuesday, and coming together again on Friday night at the Opua Yacht Club. These are among the routines that might be interpreted as ways of making themselves feel at home in an alien environment.

General Characteristics of Cruising Yachts as Homes

For the vast majority of interviewees, their yacht is far more than a means of transport that happens to be lived in at the same time: the yacht itself "has a soul", as one couple put it. There is a general personalisation of the yachts, and it's quite common among cruising people to be addressed and remembered by the yacht's name, or to be perceived as one entity. The emotional attachment of bluewater sailors to their yachts is enormous, as is their vital dependence on their homes afloat. Both are reasons for the con-

stant, extensive maintenance work performed: "We care for our boat, and out on the ocean the boat cares for us", they say.

The self-awareness and self-expression of the owner is reflected in the materiality of his yacht. Many of today's seafarers are rather well-off, and in consequence, yachts have not only grown by about ten feet in length over the last decades, but completely owner-built cruising yachts have become rare. Nevertheless, while no longer constructed from scratch, much of a yacht is customized, especially the interiors. Many bluewater sailors have a one-of-a-kind yacht – something frequently stressed in my interviews – and the work of finishing and adapting everything to cruising needs actually never ends. Naturally the yacht, and above all the cabin, mirrors the personal tastes of the owner, and though the differences in the living space available are limited, each has a different ambience. At the same time, there are some recurring themes and common elements that reveal something about the way in which a yacht becomes a home.

Even a 45-foot yacht offers only very limited space below deck, sometimes lacking even full headroom. As a result, the cockpit normally plays an important role as additional living space, and is widely used as such. Almost all of my interviews took place while sitting there, as it is the area where any other visitor would be entertained. At the same time, the cockpit is very open to the public and provides little privacy when other yachts are close by, or the yacht is docked at a jetty where people pass. Surprisingly, such openness is understood as a positive by-product of this lifestyle, in the sense that social contacts are established much more easily. It's not uncommon for other yachties or passers-by to be quickly invited on board to have a chat in the cockpit. This, of course, is a question of the personality of the hosts, and there are loners who are not fond of company.

Attitudes toward this kind of social contact also changed once one got underway. Many became accustomed to the easy 'accessibility' of their home and now valued the sociability that prevails among yachties. The transition from the cockpit to the main cabin below – from the public to the private – is fluid.

Nonetheless, not every visitor is allowed below deck, but anyone sitting in the cockpit can glance into the main cabin, the private living quarters. Depending on the size of the yacht, the main cabin is a real multipurpose space and contains not only convertible seating and a table, but also the pantry and a navigation corner. Normally only the toilet is really separated from the main cabin by a door, though sometimes there is another door between the sleeping berths (beds) in the bow and an after-cabin as well. The inside of a yacht is normally kept as open as possible in tropical climates, which means there are no really private spaces, and it rather depends on the visitor to keep a certain distance. Aware of this, I was surprised that whenever I asked, I was generously granted permission to take pictures of the entire yacht, including the sleeping quarters. (In some cases it didn't feel appropriate to ask, but the hesitation was only on my side. There are unwritten rules on how to behave as visitor on a yacht and how soon one can expect to be invited below deck.)

Life on board has many ordinary routines although the circumstances are extraordinary. Space is restricted and therefore calls for multipurpose furnishings to facilitate the use of limited space. A simplified lifestyle means forgoing comfort, for example in domestic appliances, in many ways like when one goes camping. In spite of being a proper home, a washing machine on board a cruising yacht is a highly unusual sight, and even a fridge, a freezer or a normal shower is a luxury. Yachts can carry only a limited supply of water, and electric power has to be self-generated. Some yacht owners can afford more extravagances or enjoy the comforts of a marina (e.g. unrestricted access of power and tap water), while others are most happy and content with the simple life on board for the sake of the experience and the 'freedom' it affords.

Inside the Homes Afloat

Since the ideal cruising yacht is highly independent, and is kept seaworthy at all times, the furnishings in general conform to the fact that the yacht should be able to sail any time. When asked what they had altered and customized, apart from sailing and tech-

nical improvements, the yachties I talked to pointed out clever solutions for better utilization of the restricted storage space rather than decorative effects. While under sail, everything has to be secured and stored away safely, making the interior change its appearance quite noticeably when the yacht is at anchor or docked. During non-sailing times, purely practical considerations no longer hold, and it becomes possible to decorate ones' home differently as well as to spread out belongings, either in a messy way or a tidy one.

The fact that practicality is imperative on board does not say much about how homey the interior can be. There seems to be a mild tendency to use maritime colours for cushions, to display maritime motifs on crockery, pillows and the like, as well as – much more widely seen – to put up traditional brass lamps and gauges (i.e. barometers, clocks, etc.). The question of taste comes into play, and the cabin may represent an effort to furnish traditionally or indicate an inclination toward marine nostalgia or kitsch.

Due to sailing requirements and the possibilities for modern navigation, all yachts now feature a number of technological devices: VHF and HAM radios, radar, GPS, and in many cases a notebook with electronic charts, all of which are normally accumulated in the navigation corner. Since it became available, radio communication has always been important, whether to obtain information on the weather, or to stay in touch with other yachts or radio operators, both locally and at home. Today it is possible – and affordable – to connect to the Internet and to e-mail via radio communication no matter where the yacht is located. Very much in contrast to circumnavigations even ten years ago, modern technology allows for ongoing connections, both with people at home and with the cruising community. That results in a kind of simultaneous presence of different social spaces, and of being home and away in more than one sense. Even being out on the ocean doesn't have to mean being isolated, since communication with others can be provided for. Solitude at sea is no longer an inescapable consequence of cruising.

More and more recreational technology is also found on modern yachts, and one often finds a video

screen in the main cabin along with a radio. Nevertheless, books are one of the characteristic features on cruising yachts, helping to set the look of the interior. A good part of the literature found on yachts consists of nautical guides, manuals and handbooks, as well as travel guides for all the countries on one's itinerary. Most likely there will be some sailing literature classics and various fiction as well as non-fiction books as well. Cruising offers time to read, either for lack of other entertainment, or due to being retired and having time on one's hands. Many yachties declare that reading is a favourite pastime.

Photographs of family and friends mounted on the bulkheads are another way of having one's other home present while being away. A greater tendency to put up pictures of family members could be noticed among yachties who reported strong family bonds and who wouldn't want to do without annual home-leaves to visit children and grandchildren. In other cases there are pictures of friends at home or visiting the yacht or taking part in a sailing trip. Where family or friends played a less explicit role in social involvement, hardly any pictures of this kind were present.

Next to photographs, it is common to display a broad range of souvenirs, just as in almost every traveller's home. Those found on yachts differ slightly from those of other tourists owing to the nature of sailing. The size or weight of an object is not an issue, though many souvenirs stem directly from the sea. Especially in the Pacific, most yachties desire to visit remote islands and atolls, accessible only by boat, where truly 'exotic' souvenirs can be purchased or obtained in exchange for 'Western' goods. Moreover, diving and snorkelling, often in combination with collecting shells, are favourite leisure activities among yachties of all ages.

As a result, there is usually a substantial collection of seashells, including conches and a nautilus, on display (stored away on sailing days to avoid breakage), as well as corals or the odd shark fin. Yachties do not surround themselves noticeably with 'souvenirs' from home countries, but rather with memories and artefacts from the places visited. Exhibiting souvenirs during an ongoing trip confirms that the yacht is the primary residence, the first and only home, although

these displays are also seen on yachts that can be characterized as second homes. It would be interesting to see if and how this 'theme' has a counterpart in land-based second homes: probably every summer house at the seaside holds a respectable collection of seashells, driftwood, flotsam and jetsam, and souvenirs from the places visited during the holidays.

Conclusion

Cruising yachts are by their nature means of travel, but they also function as home for long-term seafarers. Both roles are well-reflected in the interior of cruising yachts: functional items, indispensable for sailing, alongside other decorative, entertaining, or personal, homey artefacts. The limited space doesn't offer much possibility for having a room of one's own or even real privacy on board. So it isn't a surprise that most long-term sailing crews are couples, since existing intimacy facilitates living under these particular spatial constraints. However, being a couple is no guarantee for 'successful' cruising; many relationships do not survive a circumnavigation. Many sailing couples settle in a division of labour and split the responsibilities on board; often, the woman does the household chores and oversees the provisions, while the man maintains the technical equipment, the motor, and the like. Such an assignment of tasks can be interpreted as a strategy to cope with the limitations on board.

The spatial restrictions imposed by the design and size of an average cruising yacht might be considered the main burden of cruising as a lifestyle. But yachts compensate for this by being mobile and constituting a self-sustaining entity. While space for movement on board is indeed limited, the movement of the yacht itself is infinite. Otherwise hard to reach places can be visited, yet the yacht provides the comfort of being home, reliable and familiar. To many yachties, the cramped space under deck radiates cosiness rather than constriction, giving a feeling of security, whether in the middle of the ocean or on foreign shores. The vastness of the ocean is less overwhelming when experienced on board a solid and seaworthy, snug and homey cruising yacht, which while small is still perceived as safe.

**This illustration has been omitted
for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 1: SY "A" (50 ft) – in the 10th year of cruising: the 'navigation corner', starboard next to the hatchway.

A common accumulation of electronic devices (VHF and HAM radio, radar, etc.). The fact that the picture was taken when the ship was not sailing explains the clutter.

**This illustration has been omitted
for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 2: SY "A" (50 ft) – in the 10th year of cruising: main cabin, the portside sitting 'corner' (on the right is the companionway to the bow).

A common cruising yacht's 'living room'. A cosy reading corner, well equipped with fiction, decorated with pictures taken during noteworthy passages (Tierra del Fuego, Galapagos), an assortment of sea-shells and souvenirs. Storage for books always comes up short, even on this rather spacious yacht which functions as a second home of the owners.

**This illustration has been omitted
for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 3: SY "B" (45 ft) – in the 13th year of cruising: main cabin seen from one hatchway (in the middle the companionway to the bow).

Another spacious cruising yacht. The 'living room', with adjacent sleeping quarters in the bow. A wide display of family pictures, though less souvenirs. This yacht serves as the only dwelling of the owners, but they regularly visit family members in Germany. The more 'additional' space is available, the less difficult it is to keep the main cabin tidy and uncluttered.

**This illustration has been omitted
for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 4: SY "C" (44 ft) – in the 4th year of cruising: detail of the main cabin, starboard.

Electronic devices (radio on top right) spread out into the 'living room'; otherwise a typical mixture of sailing literature, music CDs for entertainment, and family pictures, taken at a non-sailing time. To keep the bench clear for seating, things are put aside and atop each other, to make the most of given storage space.

**This illustration has been omitted
for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 5: SY "D" (42 ft) – in the 15th year of cruising: main cabin, the portside sitting 'corner'.
Detail of the 'living room' of a very neatly kept cruising yacht, which is not the only home of the owners. The usual mix of travel guides and nautical literature on the bookshelves, along with a broad display of souvenirs from different places. On the bench a cushion with a maritime motif. The doll, as a personal or decorative item, is rather unusual, as are the artificial flowers.

**This illustration has been omitted
for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 6: SY "D" (42 ft): main cabin, detail of the starboard sitting 'corner' (from left to right: barometer, clock and thermometer).
The opposite corner of the same 'living room' as above, with bookshelves, shell-necklaces and artificial flowers on the right. The careful arrangement of sea-souvenirs is remarkable: a fin, coral and a bone-carving showing different fish. On the same wall one sees the typical placement of nautical instruments in brass.

**This illustration has been omitted
for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 7: SY "E" (34 ft) – in the 14th year of sailing:
pantry, next to the hatchway (on the right).
On small yachts, the pantry often lacks work
space, and when in use is readily cluttered. One
attempt to keep space free and tidy is to suspend
oft-needed objects from the ceiling.

**This illustration has been omitted
for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 8: SY "E" (34 ft): main cabin, portside (standing in the hatchway). A filled up main cabin at
non-sailing times.

The owners attach less importance to the appearance of the interior than to the functionality of
their arrangement for themselves. Yet for them, too, the effort to keep a yacht in order while living
and working on it seems hopeless and often is postponed to one final effort before sailing again.

Notes

- 1 This fieldwork was part of the ongoing research for my thesis on late-modern circumnavigations and the experiences of yachties today and the past. The cruisers' concept of 'home' is not the main focus of my research, but naturally came up in the interviews. All pictures were taken by me in order to compile a 'cultural inventory' of cruising yachts, following John Collier Jr.'s methods of photographic research.

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