

# SOUNDINGS MAGAZINE

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## Living Aboard in Winter; Tough, but Enjoyable

By Kat Kiernan

It was five degrees in the sun the first day I went to Constitution Marina in Charlestown, MA. Hand warmers were taped to my camera battery to keep it from dying and my fingers were bearing the brunt of it. I made my way through a maze of giant cocoons of shrink-wrapped boats through which I could make out shadows and outlines of figures going about their day. Illuminated from the inside, they glowed with a warmth that my fingers envied. Several of the wooden doors built into the coverings still had remnants of Christmas decorations.

These boats are home to about 100 year round residents. With so many people living in Boston's harbors and marinas it is surprising how few people are aware of this increasingly popular lifestyle. Growing up on the coast of Maine I spent fantastic and exciting summers aboard a 32-foot sloop with my parents, but childhood has a way of skewing our perceptions. I set out to explore and document the live-aboard lifestyle from an adult's perspective, one accustomed to 900 sq feet of apartment living.

Boston in February is a time when "freezing outside" is wishful thinking, as freezing point is generally 12 degrees warmer on any given day. I began documenting this residence in February 2010 and continued throughout the spring, when the cocoons had been shed and cookouts were abundant.

I photographed the marina three times a week for four months. One doesn't spend that much time skulking around a gated community with a camera without becoming somewhat of a concern. So before that I was "Kat" I was "that girl with a camera" and before that...well probably just some creep. It's a difficult job as a photographer to introduce yourself as an outsider and hope that people will be accommodating. I was fortunate enough to have met such people.

Larry Stevens was my first contact at Constitution Marina. Just as I would never walk up to an apartment in Boston and knock on the door asking to come in and photograph their home, I would never tap on a porthole and ask the same. Larry was making his way back to his vessel when he saw me with my camera, about to begin my rehearsed introduction and said, "So you want to photograph my boat? Sure it's this way." And down the dock we went. Larry has kept his sailboat in Constitution Marina for years and though he is not a live-aboard, he spends a good part of the winter doing what repairs need to be done and socializing with the other boat-owners. We spent the better part of five hours discussing the marina community, life, photography, sailing, and looking for the right size Phillips head screwdriver as he worked on the electrical system. "So why the camera?" he said with his head under the dashboard in the wheelhouse. I explained my childhood perspective on life aboard and my interest in seeing another perspective: during winter, as an adult, and a full time resident. He suggested I talk to Nadine.

Nadine Firth is a woman of irony: she is an architect without a house. She has lived in Constitution Marina going on eight years, the longest of all the live-aboards. On an unseasonably warm night Nadine cooked me dinner in the galley she practically built herself. A skilled carpenter, the aft deck of her boat serves as a workshop in the winter where she made the tongue and groove paneling for the galley and head. Nadine offers her workshop and skills to the residents of the marina, sometimes exchanging the use of her table saw for a six-pack. Or at least, that was the transaction made with Tim Robinson. Tim is also known as “Tim from the Peregrine Sea” or “Pequita’s Tim” because it is comically common in the marina to refer to families by the dog’s name first, followed by the owner’s.

April 15 is not only tax day, but also shrink-wrap removal day. With an increase in activity and favorable weather, the social scene relocates from inside heated cabins to dock chairs and swim platforms. This is when being a live-aboard means living it up. However, as most New Englanders know, April is not always the warmest month.

This particular cold and rainy April day was spent aboard the Peregrine Sea, the sailing vessel of Tim and Saudra. Both are veterans of the live-aboard lifestyle, having each lived on sailboats in different states prior to coming to Constitution Marina where they met and married. After a few hours of talking and photographing we walked onto the rain-soaked docks, camera in hand, dog trailing us, where Tim promptly slipped and fell. Standing up laughing I thought how fortunate Tim was to have not fallen a few inches to his left and into the drink...something this apartment renter is not used to considering when walking down her front steps.

My last visit to the marina was a balmy Memorial Day. Boats were now uncovered, as were arms and legs in the 70 degree weather. I handed out prints to the people I’d photographed and we kicked off the season with a barbeque, raising glasses as well as mainsails. Childhood may have romanticized boating for me, but as my adult self took the subway back to my basement apartment in a city where most people know their neighbors (if they do at all) as “the woman with the dog,” I wished I knew mine by their dog’s name first.