

**CRUISING PINE ISLAND SOUND**

# POWER CRUISING

THE MAGAZINE FOR ALL WHO CRUISE UNDER POWER

## **SURVEYING** the **SOUND**

**A Return Visit  
to One of  
America's  
Favorite  
Coastal  
Cruising  
Grounds**



# SURVEYING *the* SOUND

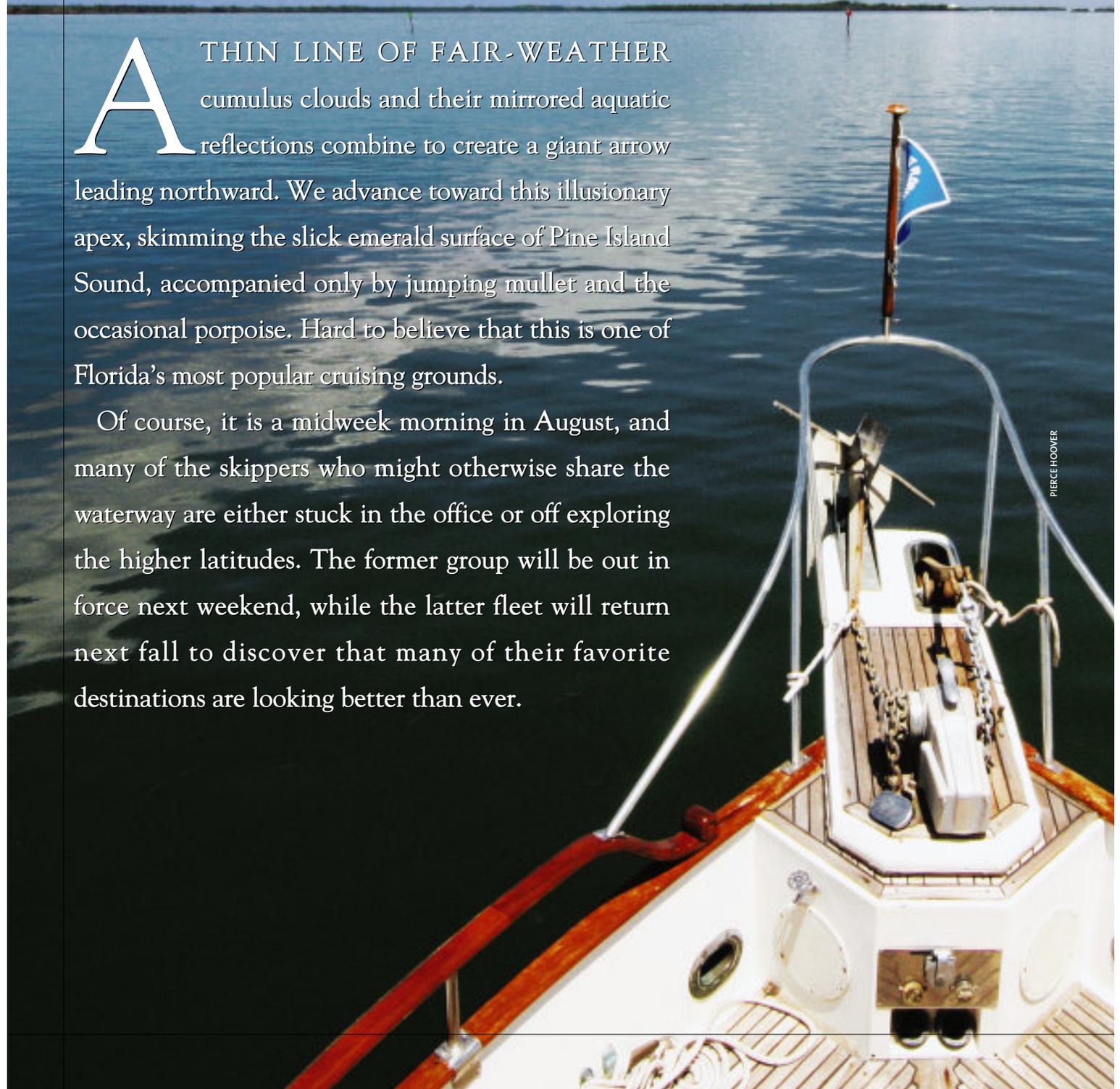
*A Return Visit to One of America's Favorite Coastal Cruising Grounds*

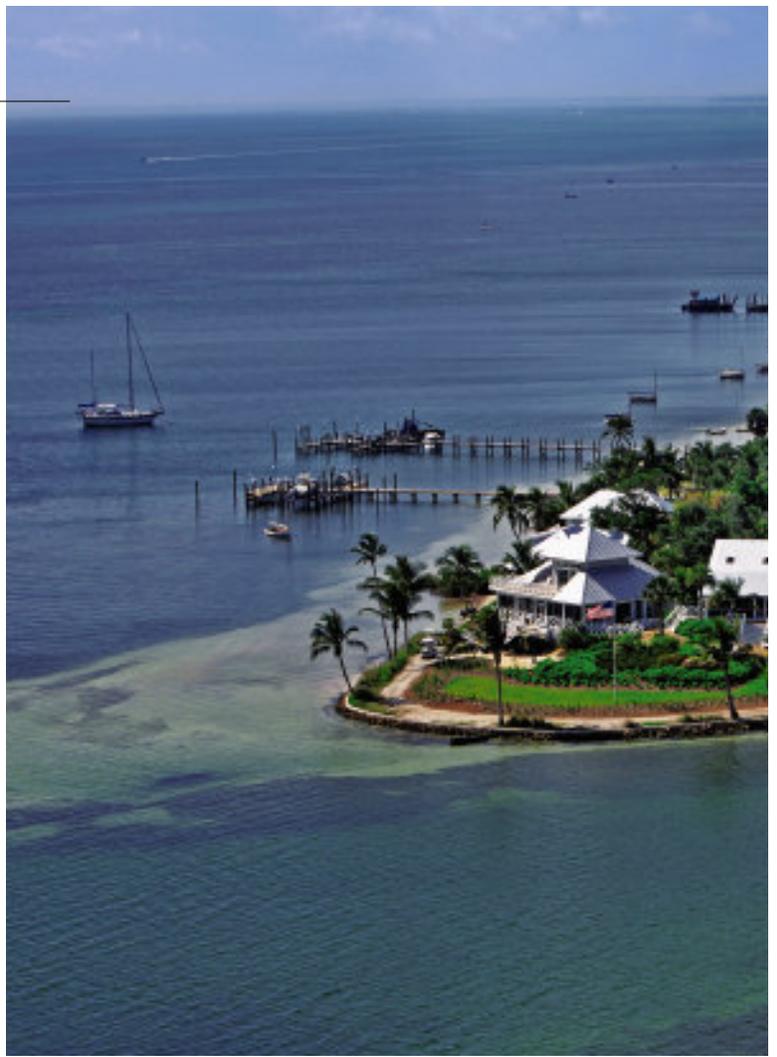
BY PIERCE HOOVER

A THIN LINE OF FAIR-WEATHER cumulus clouds and their mirrored aquatic reflections combine to create a giant arrow leading northward. We advance toward this illusionary apex, skimming the slick emerald surface of Pine Island Sound, accompanied only by jumping mullet and the occasional porpoise. Hard to believe that this is one of Florida's most popular cruising grounds.

Of course, it is a midweek morning in August, and many of the skippers who might otherwise share the waterway are either stuck in the office or off exploring the higher latitudes. The former group will be out in force next weekend, while the latter fleet will return next fall to discover that many of their favorite destinations are looking better than ever.

PIERCE HOOVER





## *Within weeks of Hurricane Charley's disastrous passage, the rebuilding began, providing an opportunity to improve.*

In August 2004, two years ago this very weekend, Hurricane Charley came ashore just south of our position. It was the strongest storm to hit the area in more than 30 years, and by the time it plowed its way north into Central Florida, its Category 4 winds had wreaked some \$13 billion in damage.

But within weeks of the disaster, the rebuilding began. And for many of the affected marinas and waterfront resorts, the mandate of reconstruction provided an opportunity not just to replace, but to improve.

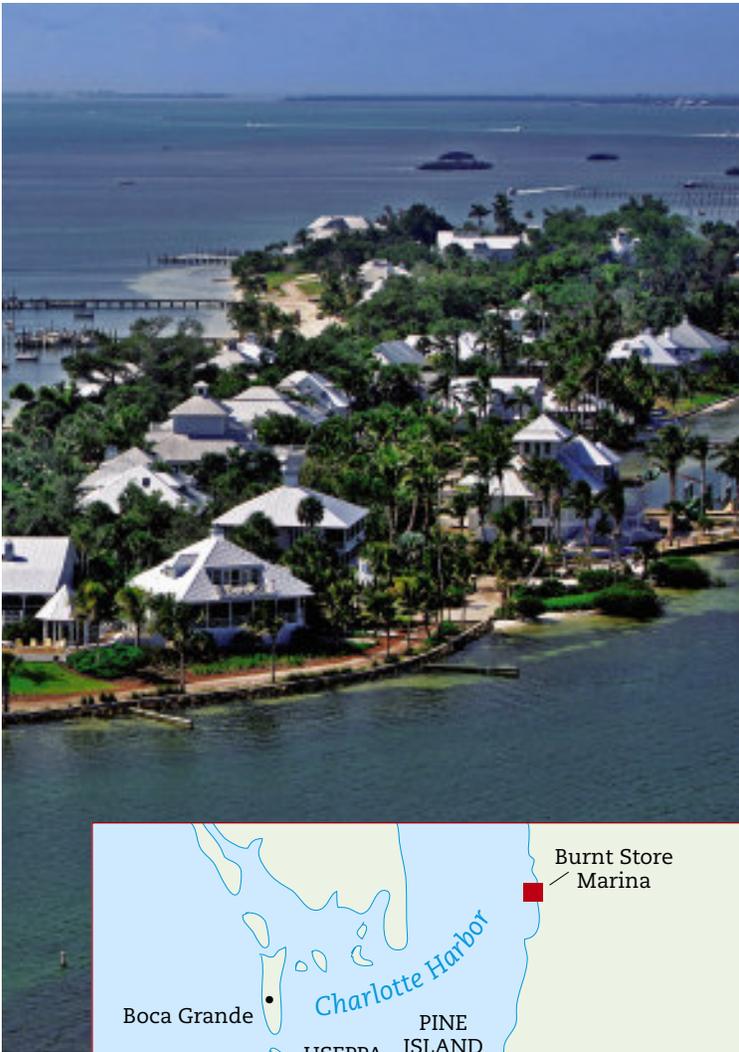
The purpose of our cruise is to document this ongoing, post-hurricane upgrade — which doesn't preclude having a bit of fun along the way. Our journey began at the docks of Southwest Florida Yachts in North Fort Myers, where we took command of the *Maretta Rose*, a 42-foot Grand Banks that is the current flagship of the company's charter fleet. A sunrise run down the Caloosahatchee River and a turn to the north just past the Miserable Mile channel brought us into the open expanses of Pine Island, leaving ample time to dawdle and poke into favorite anchorages such as York Island and Ding Darling while still making Useppa Island in time for lunch.

Useppa lay square in the path of Charley, and both the

marina and a number of homes and public buildings on this private-island enclave suffered significant damage. But that's now a thing of the past, and as dockmaster Mike Beardon asserts when we tie up, "Charley actually did us a favor." He proudly points out the newly reconstructed docks, which sport new water lines, power boxes and cable-television feeds. Ashore, we discover that the venerable Collier Inn has been rebuilt and is open for lunch, but we opt for the more casual bill of fare at the waterfront Tarpon Bar, which has been fitted with a new roof and an air-conditioned weather enclosure — a feature that is much appreciated on muggy summer days.

Though the entire island is a private resort, the Useppa Marina welcomes a select number of transient cruisers. As charter clients of Southwest Florida Yachts, we could check in as guests of company owners Barb and Vic Hansen. The resort has reciprocal arrangements with a number of yacht clubs, and boaters who might be considering membership can schedule a get-acquainted visit. The marina now offers 30 slips and an additional 280 feet of side-tie dockage.

But for us, lunch and a quick stroll around the freshly landscaped property are all we have time for before continuing our



COURTESY LEE COUNTY VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU (2)



**The docks at Useppa Island have been completely renovated and are in better shape now than before Hurricane Charley passed through (far left). The entire island is a privately owned resort enclave, but cruisers can gain access to the marina (and facilities with reciprocal club privileges) by purchasing a membership or arranging for a 'get acquainted' visit.**

meandering northward track. Next up is a pass through Pelican Bay, where the landing docks for Cayo Costa State Park seem to be in fine shape, and where the entrance channel still provides a bit more than four feet of water at low tide.

From this popular anchorage, we continue north into the

open expanses of Charlotte Harbor. Offering more than 120 square miles of waterway with uniform depths of at least 10 to 12 feet, this protected body of water is a favorite with sailors, and it provides power cruisers with a break from the markers.

Turning east by northeast, we set a course for the Burnt Store Marina, which was also right in Charley's path and was out of commission for a period of time thereafter. Two years later, we see no evidence of damage as we idle into the landscaped basin. Southwest Florida Yachts bases its sailboat fleet and sailing school at Burnt Store, and we are able to slide into one of the company's unoccupied slips for the night. After a quick dip in the resort pool, we shower and take a short walk to enjoy fresh-caught grouper at Portobello's restaurant — after which I settle into the aft cabin for the rare treat of a free evening and a good book.

The following morning finds us back on the open expanses of Charlotte Harbor, holding a course for Gasparilla Island and the picturesque village of Boca Grande. Though there are several smaller facilities offering a handful of transient dock spaces, cruisers visiting Boca have two primary options: anchoring in the popular basin just north of the cut or turning south to secure a slip at Millers Marina.

On our arrival, we discovered that the latter facility has been closed for renovations and will reopen in early October as the Boca Grande Marina. Some new pilings and decking are in evidence, but the major upgrades appear to be taking place shoreside, where O'Bannon's Angler's Grille is being transformed into an upscale eatery that will reportedly reopen in early 2007 as the Eagle Restaurant.

Boca is the sort of place where one could easily dally for a day or two, but with a schedule to keep, we are too soon on our way back south, once more passing the wild expanses of Cayo Costa, then turning west at ICW marker 60 to negotiate the short channel into the region's most storied waypoint.

Originally constructed as a private island retreat for the family of novelist Mary Roberts Rinehart, the property later became a modest fishing resort. The island has been owned and operated by the Wells family since the late 1960s, and today, the Cabbage Key Inn is best known for the fantastic collection of signed dollar bills that covers the walls and ceiling of the dining room and bar — an estimated \$70,000 in weathered greenbacks.

Of almost equal notoriety is the cheeseburger lunch, which some claim provided the culinary inspiration for songwriter Jimmy Buffet's famous ballad. In season, water taxis deliver a steady stream of midday visitors, and the kitchen will serve up as many as 700 lunches each day, going through 2,000 pounds of ground beef a week.

After today's crowd departs, manager Ken Wells takes me on a tour of the property. Perched atop a shell midden, and somewhat sheltered from southerly and westerly winds by the surrounding island's lush vegetation, the historic Old House and most of the associated rental cottages and outbuildings escaped the full fury of Charley's winds. There was, however,



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**The channel to Cabbage Key Inn (top), up and running within a few weeks of the storm, displays the same iconic charm that has lured generations of cruisers. Storm winds didn't displace the inn's impressive collection of autographed dollar bills (above left). As part of a \$50-million renovation, the docks and waterfront amenities at the South Seas Resort have been upgraded (above right).**

an estimated \$750,000 in damage to the resort, Ken says. Some buildings suffered water damage, the island's water tower lost its top and several of the towering royal palms on the front lawn were toppled.

Overall, however, Cabbage Key seems to have fared quite well. The Old House escaped virtually unscathed, and the entire enterprise was up and running within a month. Today, it looks much the same as before the storm, and the place will undoubtedly remain a must-do stop on every cruiser's list.

Casting off in mid-afternoon, we set a course to another regional favorite — one that didn't get off quite as easily when Charley passed through. The South Seas Island Resort and Yacht Harbor occupies some 330 acres on the northern tip of Captiva Island, encompassing a number of luxury villa complexes, pools, shops, a championship golf course and one of the area's best marinas.

Situated on the point known as Land's End, the marina

and many of the associated buildings felt the full force of Charley's winds and suffered considerable damage. The resort closed its doors and subsequently underwent a change in ownership that has now resulted in an ambitious multi-million-dollar makeover of the entire property.

We can hear the chatter of jackhammers as we idle up the channel and tie to the pristine new docks. The dockmaster tells us that in addition to the new pilings and planking, the marina has upgraded 30-, 50- and 100-amp power service, new water lines, full wi-fi coverage and a new high-speed pumpout facility.

Now known as the Harborside Grill, the marina eatery has undergone upgrades to both the décor and the menu. The greatest changes, however, are happening across the way, where the complex that once housed the pool and ship's store is being rebuilt from the ground up. When completed, it will provide a dramatic new center point for the resort. Renderings depict an

idyllically landscaped pool (complete with a waterfall) and a two-story restaurant with a commanding view of the pool, the point and the waters of Redfish Pass. Plans call for the complex to open by mid- to late November, and the marina will offer two hours of complimentary dockage for restaurant patrons.

Knowing that we will be back to indulge in these amenities once the construction is completed, we return once more to the Intracoastal for a short run to our final destination.

The aptly named 'Tween Waters Inn straddles a narrow section of Captiva Island, overlooking both the Gulf and the Sound, which are separated by less than 100 yards. In addition to 41 slips, the 13-acre property includes a number of vintage but well-maintained hotel rooms and cottages, a day spa, pool and three restaurants.

The highlight of our evening will be the NASCRAB races, which are staged twice weekly at the Crow's Nest Restaurant and Lounge. An island tradition for more than 30 years, this crustacean competition is more about the show than the go, and the proceeds are donated to area charities.

We're due back in Fort Myers the next morning, having seen more destinations in three days than many visitors see during a week-long charter. Next time — when our mission isn't to survey the facilities but to enjoy them — we, too, will cruise at a more leisurely pace, enjoying the region's blend of natural beauty and first-rate amenities, which are now better than ever. ❁

*Special thanks to Barb and Vic Hansen of Southwest Florida Yachts for suggesting a return visit to one of our favorite cruising grounds and for their help in organizing the tour.*

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## RESOURCES

**NOAA Charts #11426, #11427**

**Boca Grande Marina**

800-859-7529

**Burnt Store Marina**

941-637-0083; [www.burntstoremarina.com](http://www.burntstoremarina.com)

**Cabbage Key Inn**

239-283-2278; [www.cabbagekey.com](http://www.cabbagekey.com)

**Cayo Costa State Park**

941-964-0375; [www.floridastateparks.org/cayocosta](http://www.floridastateparks.org/cayocosta)

**SouthSeas Island Resort**

877-205-1293; [www.southseas.com](http://www.southseas.com)

**Southwest Florida Yachts**

800-262-7939; [www.swfyachts.com](http://www.swfyachts.com)

**'Tween Waters Inn**

800-223-5865; [www.tween-waters.com](http://www.tween-waters.com)

**Useppa Island Club**

239-283-1061; [www.useppa.com](http://www.useppa.com)



PIERCE-HOOVER

**Despite its proximity to both the Gulf and to Pine Island Sound, the 'Tween Waters Inn came through Charley with relatively minor damage. Guests of the marina have access to the resort's amenities and a prime stretch of beach.**