





STORY KIM KAVIN

FATE & FAITH

A COUPLE MAKES THE LEAP FROM LANDLUBBERS TO LIVEABOARDS
WITH TWO 90-POUND DOGS—AND ZERO BOATING EXPERIENCE

At first, the conversation went way worse than poorly.

It was 2012, and Rob and Deanna Piwowarczyk were newlyweds. They'd met in Colorado and were living in the mountains, where Deanna had horses and dogs. She was in her early 40s, working in software; he was five years older and owned a tire shop. Between them, a canoe was the only boat they'd ever owned.

"Shortly after we got married, Rob sprung it on me that he wanted to live on a boat someday," Deanna recalls. "I said, 'I'm going to have to die or you have to divorce me, because I have no desire to live on a boat.'"

But then, in 2015, Deanna had a good year at work and sprang for a vacation. Along with Rob's two daughters, in their teens and 20s, the couple chartered the crewed 72-foot Irwin *Sandcastle* in the Virgin Islands.

Halfway through the week, Deanna was having such a great time that she turned to Rob and told him they were chartering again the following year, sans the kids—and they did, booking 10 nights aboard in late 2016.

By January 2017, Deanna could see herself living aboard. They started a Sunday morning routine, she says: "We would wake up, pop open Champagne and sit in bed on our laptops looking at boat porn. We'd just look at boats."

Rob would point out trawlers with good fuel efficiency, full-displacement hulls and Portuguese bridges. Deanna kept showing him sleek, high-speed yachts from Italy.

"Rob was like, 'We're never going to buy an Azimut,'" she says with a laugh, now that she understands his point. "So then I was set on matching all his criteria, but on a boat that was also sexy with good outdoor living space."

Within a month, she found the listing for *Bella Luna*. The Selene 55, built in 2005, was half an hour south of the office in Santa Barbara, California, where Deanna sometimes worked. They called the brokerage firm Jeff Merrill Yacht Sales in Seal Beach, California, and told Merrill that they needed about three years before they could retire and become buyers—but that they wanted see *Bella Luna*.



Before they bought the Selene 55, Bella Luna, the only boat that Rob and Deanna Piowarczyk had owned between them was a canoe. They are now liveaboards, and Rob is working on his six-pack license. They're planning to cruise from Southern California to La Paz, Mexico, later this year with their two 90-pound dogs, Luna and Moose.





'This was supposed to happen,' Deanna says about living aboard. 'It was meant to be.'

Merrill set up a one-hour tour, during a window before actual buyers were scheduled to arrive. The Piwowarczyks stepped aboard aft, through *Bella Luna*'s cockpit.

The door was open to the salon. They saw the teak. The space.

"When we were finished and saw the real buyers walking up the dock, Rob asked the owner if he could take a picture of us with the boat," Deanna says. "And then he posted it on Facebook with the words, 'Our new home.'"

They called Merrill that same afternoon, and he promptly reminded them that they were not in the market to buy a boat. When they pushed, he said they at least had to see a few other boats—on something besides their laptops.

"I said, 'This may be the right boat, but you can't know if you don't know what else is out there,'" Merrill says. He sent them to Seattle to tour trawlers, but even after looking, they remained smitten. "They said, 'This is the one we want to get.'"

In August 2017, three months from the day they saw her, the Piwowarczyks were doing a sea trial and hauling out *Bella Luna* for an inspection. Ten days after that, they moved aboard.

"We sold our house, we sold our business, all within three months of seeing her," Deanna says. "It just felt like the stars lined up."

One of Deanna's dogs was named Belle. There also was a Great Dane mix who'd arrived with the name Bella, which they'd changed to Luna. The dogs were Belle and Luna, and

the boat was *Bella Luna*. And when the couple put their house up for sale, it had a buyer in three days—over asking price.

"This was supposed to happen," Deanna says. "It was meant to be."

Luna, who weighs 90 pounds, now lives aboard with Deanna, Rob and a 90-pound Golden-Chow mix named Moose. The dogs had never been on a boat when the couple walked them down the dock and away from their lives with a house, a doggie door and 2½ fenced acres to run and play.

"I was mostly worried about them adjusting—them, and room for my shoes," Deanna says. "That's still a problem, but the dogs, they were immediately amazing."

So were *Bella Luna*'s previous owner and broker. The previous owner spent 50 hours on board showing the Piwowarczyks the ropes (literally), and Merrill spent a long weekend aboard in the Channel Islands to teach them more.

"It's easier the first time if somebody shows you," Merrill says. "I talk to them about it, and they have their hands and eyes and do it. That way, they get the muscle memory."

By that time, the couple also had other lessons learned—because when they bought *Bella Luna*, they also bought the boat's day-charter business. Chartering became Rob's new job, going out with hired captains on day cruises and learning from them. Deanna joined when she could.

"It was almost a year, I think, before we really felt comfortable that when we don't do the charters, we can do it ourselves," Rob says.

Their first solo cruise was to Catalina Island with the dogs, about seven hours down and eight hours back, at a cruising speed of 8 to 9 knots. When they arrived, they picked up a mooring ball—after watching YouTube videos to figure out how.

"We landed it the first time," Deanna says. "That was awesome."

Rob has since passed the written test for a six-pack captain's license, and he's building up sea time to meet those requirements. In November, the couple plans to do the San Diego Yacht Club's CUBAR Odyssey, cruising about 1,000 miles from Southern California to La Paz, Mexico.

Thinking about that, Deanna says, has them also thinking about *Bella Luna*'s 1,500-gallon fuel capacity.

"We can go 3,000 miles on a single tank of fuel," Deanna says. "She can circumnavigate the globe if we ever want to do that."

The current plan is to leave the boat in Mexico for the winter and explore the Sea of Cortez, then head to the Pacific Northwest in summer 2020, when Deanna hopes to retire. After that, it's on to Alaska, then down to the Panama Canal and across the Caribbean Sea to the Virgin Islands, where their boating dream began. They're thinking that their new homeport might be St. Croix.

"It's pretty cool," Merrill says. "They're living proof that anyone can do it if you have the right attitude and you're not afraid to take a few risks." ❁