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Great Siberian Sushi Run book review

By Jeff Merrill



There is nothing like reading a great seafaring travel story to remind why you want to cut your dock lines and sail to the horizon. Late last year, Ken Williams published his third book about cruising on a Nordhavn – a remarkable recap of a three boat band that traversed the North Pacific in Spring/Summer 2009. *The Great Siberian Sushi Run* is an outstanding journal that chronicles the intrepid adventure of three Nordhavns taking a 5,938-mile trek from Seattle to Japan.

Ken's previous two books, *Crossing an Ocean Under Power* (a recap of the 2004 Nordhavn Atlantic Rally in which he participated on his first Nordhavn, a 62) and *Crossing Under Power – Pacific Coasts of Mexico and Central America*, were well written compilations of his exhaustive email posts that included daily updates of where he was and what was happening on board.

The Great Siberian Sushi Run continues Ken's familiar storytelling style, but in a more appealing and inspiring way. The Williams unabashed and enthusiastic sea reports have created a world wide audience enthralled with finding out what they will do next, not to mention longing to switch places with Shelby, their beloved Norwegian Lund Hound and faithful companion on the long ranging adventures.

As a bit of background, Ken is an internet guru. In fact, he and his wife Roberta – a computer guru herself – were on to the computer thing back when the rest of us were using slide rules and suspicious of digital calculators. The Williams launched a famous computer game company called Sierra On-line and produced such famous game titles as *Kings Quest*,



Half-Life and my favorite, *Leisure Suit Larry*.



They sold the business and decided to see the world by boat. Ken's stated goal for cruising is to "see the world and to do so by visiting places that very few people have EVER seen". They took delivery of their first Nordhavn in 1998 and spent much of their time cruising Europe, yet they were amongst the first to sign up for the [Nordhavn Atlantic Rally](#) – an 18 boat Atlantic convoy that set the bar for all future power boat rallies. Despite having shipped their boat to France just a couple years before, the Williams were eager to join the Rally in order to get their first exposure to offshore cruising.

Enjoying their 62, but longing for a little more room, Ken talked PAE president Dan Streech into stretching the Nordhavn 64 hull and adding an aft pilothouse deck arrangement (like his beloved 62) which evolved into the Nordhavn 68. Ken and Roberta built the first Nordhavn 68, sold their 62 (to eclectic singer Bjork no less) and took off to explore Mexico.

With the magic of the NAR still enduring after four years, Ken decided to seek out a similar rally feel with fellow Nordhavns, but this time across the Pacific. He blogged about the idea, which drew a lot of attention, but never got past the proverbial drawing board. Cue Ken's conversation with Nordhavn 62 owner John Kennelly who had taken his wife and three young kids from Japan to Seattle on their boat. John spoke with such enthusiasm about the trip that Ken was convinced to explore the same route, but in the opposite direction: Seattle to Alaska, across the Aleutians and then arc down to Japan. (Their westward track hence spurred the nickname "The Wrong-way Gang.")



Ken and Roberta formed an alliance with two Nordhavn 62 owners, Steven and Carol Argosy of *Seabird* and Braun and Tina Jones from *Grey Pearl* and the idea went from a crazy concept to an intricately organized expedition.



How do you plan a trip for three boats a) going to places most people have never been and b) passing through remote locales where repairs to potentially injured boats (and people) would be practically impossible? This book does a great job of discussing the planning steps and shares many invaluable tidbits that will benefit all cruisers no matter how far they wish to roam.

The story of how this bold group started with a dream, figured out a plan and accomplished their goal is inspiring and educational. Ken's writing style has grown more conversational over time and you feel like you are in direct contact with him. Recognizing that that *Sans Souci* maintained internet connection throughout the trip is integral to understanding the book's format. Unlike any other sea travel adventure I've ever read, this book includes feedback from the audience of Ken's blog, who he kept updated with frequent posts (and to offer greater understanding of the trip, provided links to websites which offer additional details about the people, places and things the group encountered). It's a great vehicle for formatting, preserving and sharing this type of journey. How often do you read a book where the readers influence the actions and activities of the main characters?

For the thousands who followed along on Ken's GSSR website, www.kensblog.com, (myself included), you'll enjoy rereading the blogs and reader commentaries in book form. I love the interplay between Ken and his readers who suggest sites to see, places to stop while discussing the details of daily happenings and debating all of the age-old differences in



cruising philosophy. In fact, one enthusiastic reader writes: “Your trip is likely going to change my future. Watching you has cemented my desire to travel by boat when retirement comes around. I have to assume you’re paving the way for more who will follow”. Amen to that!

The modern trawler traveler, equipped with a good internet connection, can research his adventure underway and pick the brains of knowledgeable followers for advice to make each day even more fulfilling and continually improve the trip. You can keep in touch not only with loved ones, but keep track of the weather and everything else happening back in the real world ashore. Some may wish to enjoy the disconnect that separation at sea provides, but Ken thrives on typing up reports and I can’t imagine how many hours he spent tapping his fingers while peering out the pilothouse to describe each day as it unfolded. One of my favorite quotes comes from Aleutian Sea know-it-all and *Sans Souci* crew member Bill Harrington, who, while referring to Ken’s propensity for becoming all- absorbed in his electronics said, “This isn’t a boat, it’s a (bleep)-ing video game!”



The bond developed between the three traveling Nordhavns gets stronger with each passing mile and the captains are clearly on the same wave length. They want to enjoy the journey, wish they could linger a little longer, but know they need to make tracks while the weather smiles.

The book itself is divided into 42 chapters and covers the time period from March 18th, 2009 to September 14th, 2009. All three of the Nordhavns were built by the Ta Shing yard in Taiwan and embody the ultimate in long range passage makers.

Ken tells all in his musings and though he considers his cruising expertise to be a bit “dubious” he has selectively mastered this form of travel - and has done so in a style that is unique to what he and Roberta like. In fact, he cautions his readers during one narrative with the statement, “But, of course, this is my blog, so I guess it’s OK to state my opinions...as long as no one gets confused and thinks I know what I’m talking about...” There are very informative discussions interspersed throughout the book on such important cruising topics as medical kits (and injuries – “the most dangerous thing we’ve done is climbing on and off of the boat”), sonar, ships logs, engine room checks, paper charts (*Sans Souci* had 85 pounds worth!), running in formation, using an agent, plus much, much more which are covered with all kinds of useful tidbits and insights. Correspondence with other Nordhavns on other simultaneous adventures - the Nordhavn 50 *Flat Earth* going from Hawaii to Seattle and the Nordhavn 55 *SKIE* circumnavigating Australia and following Sprague Theobald’s Northwest Passage on the Nordhavn 57 *Bagan* – show the reach of the Nordhavn cruising community.



There is a lot of history in the Aleutian Islands, particularly with respect to World War II that I had no idea about. So this is

much more than a waypoint to waypoint diary. And an assortment of URLs point you to as much detail as you wish to learn. How many people go cross the Pacific via Siberia? I loved it when the GSSR called the USSR by VHF to request permission to arrive in Petropavlovsk!

We learn (or perhaps, we reconfirm) that the Nordhavns can take it, but how about the crew? Before weighing anchor each boat's captain voted to hold fast or move on. The teamwork between three different crews to coordinate this trek through the waters made famous in the TV show "The Deadliest Catch" is impressive. They knew before setting out that they would need to be self-sufficient as they "prepared for the worst and hoped it was a wasted effort". One mishap occurred while gaffing a huge halibut: the fish was boated, but the RIB she was reeled into was deflated!



Ken flew to Dana Point, CA last October to give a talk and present a slide presentation of the GSSR during the Nordhavn Owners Rendezvous. Hearing him tell the stories live added a great dimension to my appreciation of this epic voyage. It was fun to see the man in person as he is a genuinely humble ambassador for the cruising lifestyle.

Shortly after finishing the book I ran into Ken's captain, Jeff Sanson, at a high school sailing regatta our two daughters were competing in. Jeff is one of the many heroes from this book and it was fun to talk with him to hear more about the trip. I also enjoyed a December lunch with Steven and Carol Argosy of *Seabird* while in Dana Point visiting family and they truly enjoyed the GSSR and are now waiting in Osaka for the three crews to reband and continue on...departing Japan (after getting their fill of sushi) in April or May of this year with a new route and a new destination still being organized.



Whether you are a coastal cruiser, passage maker or armchair admiral, I strongly encourage you to add a copy of *The Great Siberian Sushi Run* to your nautical library and keep your eyes open for what will certainly be more installments in the months and years ahead. You can purchase this – or any of Ken's books – at <http://stores.lulu.com/kenw>. To join in on the next adventure in real time, be sure to sign up on Ken's blog by going to www.kensblog.com and www.kensotherblog.com.



Jeff Merrill is a salesman for Nordhavn based in the California office who loves to read fiction and ocean travel logs.

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