

July 30, 2010

Ta Shing welcomes the GSSR fleet
Boats' "homecoming" cause for celebration

By Jeff Merrill

(Ed. note – this is the first of a multi-part series on the very first Nordhavns ever to return to the factory where they were constructed. California-based Nordhavn sales representative Jeff Merrill, traveling aboard one of the boats, Nordhavn 62 Seabird, had the privilege of participating in the historical event which took place July 3, 2010, and documented the days preceding, during and following the occasion.)



As we closed in on the harbor, my ears zeroed in on the steady cadence of pounding drums. BOOM-boom-boom-boom-BOOM-boom-boom-boom... We rounded the corner and into view came colorful flags flapping in the breeze. And there were people – there had to be almost a hundred people – all smiling, and waving and cheering. I squinted my eyes and made out three giant Chinese dancing lions. This was pretty surreal! And it was all for us – well, it was all for the people whose boats I happen to be lucky enough to be catching a ride on. The celebration, the cheering and the dancing heralded the arrival of the [Great Siberian Sushi Run](#) (GSSR) fleet as we pulled into An Ping harbor in Tainan, Taiwan on July 3rd, 2010. The home waters for Ta Shing Yacht Building Company have seen plenty of Nordhavns sail south to the shipping port of Kaohsiung destined for distant shores and new owners, but never before have any Nordhavns returned home; it was an event worthy of the lively outpouring of sheer joy and pride that was bestowed upon the fleet.

But wait...Let's back up a bit to the days preceding this most awesome moment in time.

Most Nordhavn website readers are very familiar with the GSSR, which departed Seattle in spring 2009 and traveled over 5,200 miles last summer to arrive in Osaka, Japan. (Ken Williams wrote a book about this last year which I [reviewed](#) for nordhavn.com and highly recommend purchasing). The fleet consists of three Ta Shing built boats: Nordhavn 62 #4 *Seabird* owned by Steven and Carol Argosy, Nordhavn 62#9 *Grey Pearl* sailed by Braun and Martina Jones and Nordhavn 68#5 *Sans Souci* operated by Ken and Roberta Williams.



With the original Sushi mission completed and the fleet settled in Osaka at the end of the 2009 cruising season, the plans for “what’s next” started falling into place. Ultimately the idea of convoying the following season to Hong Kong was agreed upon. This would mean traveling from north to south through the Japanese islands. And then...someone had a wild idea that the fleet could stop in Taiwan and visit the boats’ birthplace before heading east to Hong Kong. After consulting

with PAE and Ta Shing, the idea was unanimously approved, in fact, as a first-time occurrence, it would be cause for celebration.

My friendship with Steven and Carol Argosy led to a [lunch in Dana Point](#) last December where we talked about logistics for the Taiwan portion of the trip and I realized right away that not only did I want to participate, but that I could likely be a big help as a common denominator, given my status as a PAE employee, my relationship with the Ta Shing staff and my friendship with the GSSR crews. The following six months were filled with multiple emails and phone calls to sort out arrival, accommodations and sightseeing excursions – planning as much as we could, but also allowing room for a little chaos and flexibility, (you have to when you are talking about traveling in boats!) Of course, some time was allocated toward addressing punchlists – figuring that we’d be dockside to Ta Shing for a few days; naturally we’d have to take advantage of the most expert of Nordhavn techs! The plan was set. As the GSSR crews returned to their boats in March to get ready for part two of their adventure, Ta Shing flew two employees, Al Liu and Mr. Tung to Osaka, Japan to meet with each couple to discuss work repairs and upgrades that could be organized and completed during a one week layover in Taiwan.

As we got closer to summer I confirmed with Steven and Carol that I was ready to make my travel plans and they also encouraged me to bring along my 13-year-old son Jonn, who has grown up around boats and been on many Nordhavns over the years, but had never taken part in an overnight passage. Since Jonn would be on summer vacation it seemed like a perfect father-son adventure, and since we’d be gone over two weeks it would make it a little easier on my wife Pam and daughter Elle who could enjoy a “girls’ fortnight”. Carol, ever thoughtful, sent an email asking for food suggestions and then did some great shopping in advance (I am partial to honey in my coffee – it goes back to another Nordhavn trip a few years ago where no artificial sweeteners were “allowed” on the boat and so I converted to honey and have been transformed ever since. Carol was able to find a huge bottle for me!). I suppose it’s a bit different when you are thinking about food for a teenager, too. (The key to food for a teenager is not so much what, but how much.) The only thing on our list Carol couldn’t find was maple and brown sugar oatmeal – so we flew over with two boxes (as well as some snacks including a Costco size box of Clif bars – a great energy bar treat to enjoy on watch – and a large tub of peanut butter, because I truly believe it is a miracle spread.)

Even though I have made numerous trips to Taiwan in the past, I hit a new snag at LAX when Jonn and I checked in. The EVA (Evergreen Airlines) staff did not understand how we were flying in to Japan and flying back from Taiwan. It took some explaining to let them know we were traveling by private boat between Japan and Taiwan after which they wanted to see some sort of verification from our captain. It was 10 pm in LA so I called Steven Argosy on my cell phone. Fortunately he answered (it was morning in Japan). I e-mailed our situation to him (hooray for Smartphones) and he promptly drafted a letter aboard *Seabird* and faxed it over to EVA. This satisfied the EVA staff and we proceeded to the departure lounge. One of the key things that I truly believed added some officialdom to Steven’s email was his *Seabird* boat stamp. Each of the boats in the GSSR fleet have an automatic stamper that inks about a 50-cent piece-sized stamp - it looks like a large postal cancellation ring and has a logo, the boat name, USCG documentation number and, as I later learned from Steven, has been worth its weight in

gold. This was one of those discoveries that I love to make when travelling with various Nordhavn owners.



Jonn and I flew from Taipei to Okinawa where we cleared into Japan. (Immigration was a bit confused about the whole arriving by plane and departing by boat arrangement. I kept my mouth shut and looked the agent in the eye and brainwaved him to stamp the passports and let us go. It obviously worked because we were cleared in shortly after.) So

about 20 hours later in real world time we were gathering our bags and hopping into a taxi on the beautiful Japanese island of Ishigaki. Steven had the GSSR local Japanese agent book a hotel room for us as the fleet would be arriving the following day. This gave Jonn and I a day to rest up, acclimate and check out the town. I'd gone online prior to leaving home and printed out the hotel information (it was in Japanese) to hand to the cab driver so we had no trouble getting to the hotel, but once we arrived we learned that they did not have our prepaid reservation in our name. I could not access my email account and my international phone could call, but not do email, so Jonn saved the day by getting online in the hotel lobby and after several hours of emails, and hotel lobby land line calls to Steven and Carol aboard *Seabird* (who were underway), and lots of anxious waiting, we discovered that our reservation had been made in the name of the local agent – Mr. Tsujino....geez, how were we supposed to guess that name?



The following day we walked around the harbor, an amazing conglomeration of man made concrete coves filled with local fishing boats and dive boat operators. Ishigaki is a resort island that caters to Japanese and Taiwanese tourists and there is a strong emphasis on scuba diving and snorkeling. There are a handful of nearby islands serviced by high-speed ferries so there is a lot of activity in the community and a lot of boat traffic in the harbor.



Our hotel, the Toyoko Inn, was situated in the harbor area and we were not exactly certain when the fleet would arrive so we went in to town to kill some time, found a US restaurant where we could read the writing and understand the menu – good ol' A&W so Jonn could get one last fix of cheeseburgers and then Jonn and I took turns every thirty minutes going up to the 10th floor and scanning the horizon looking for



Nordhavns. The GSSR fleet would be running approximately 80 miles from Miyako Island where they had holed up for a spell to wait for better weather. About 4pm I spied something very familiar in this decidedly different harbor – it was a very welcoming realization to immediately recognize three Nordhavns prowling around – all right!



Jonn and I ran out to the harbor and found *Sans Souci* bucking around into a seawall with *Seabird* and *Grey Pearl* heading away to search for better moorage. It was great to see Ken and Roberta, but it was clear to me that even though they had lines on huge cruise ship sized bollards and were undoubtedly ready to be done, this was an unacceptable place to park, far too much wake and surge. They would have never slept. So after some quick consulting Ken invited Jonn and I aboard to help them catch up with the other two boats and find a calmer place to moor

As tired as Ken and Roberta must have felt from a full day of cruising, Jonn and I got new life as we pulled away from the dock on the 68. Hey, we're on a boat in Japan! Jonn immediately got down on his knees to meet the Williams' dog, Shelby. Then Ken turned the helm over to Jonn to steer from the Portuguese bridge wing station. Jonn took off to pursue the 62s and I was scouting the shore looking for an area we might have walked by yesterday that might offer a more comfortable anchorage. In the meantime Ken and Roberta got on the VHF and poured over the local charts. Outside keeping an eye on things I met *Sans Souci's* stowaway, a praying mantis – not sure where that guy came from!



We cruised passed a Japanese Coast Guard station and spied what appeared to be a seawall dock space big enough for us to tie up to. It was a breakwater opening into an enclosed harbor (one of the many “concrete coves” that make up the Ishigaki fishing harbor waterfront). In the meantime we tracked *Seabird* and *Grey Pearl's* AIS targets on the chart plotter as they moved to some of the coves further away. Ken was unclear about the depth and it was pretty near low tide so while the 62's went to one location, Roberta and I conferred and agreed to move *Sans Souci* to a different area and then Ken did a great job of putting us into a pretty tight seawall. I was surprised that the agent didn't have specific docking locations for the fleet. It seemed like the GSSR had permission to arrive in Ishigaki, but then had to figure it out on their own...this is an unsettling feeling after you have done a long trip. We are so lucky in the US to have marinas with numbered docks and slips. Maybe we have it too easy in the States?



We tied up the 68 and then Jonn and I bolted over some concrete walls to the other harbor to help gather lines for *Seabird* and *Grey Pearl*. The 62s had a slightly smoother water location, but the tie offs were stainless steel rings cast into the concrete, and some of the rings were just about rusted through. The seawall had a built in sidewalk and there were fishing and dive boats scattered about. We all wondered if it was “first come – first served” or if we might get “bumped” in the middle of the night when some weary fisherman came pattering into port to reclaim his rightful space... There was some conversation about having *Sans Souci* move from their position (there was actually room behind our boats, but it would be another tight fit) then I checked it out physically – walked it off to confirm spacing and noticed there was a floating mooring line (some sort of outboard anchor lead for a “home” boat that tied to that part of the seawall) and I worried that it would snag *Sans Souci*’s fins or running gear so we told them not to try it. Eventually the local agent got all of our places approved and we settled in. With everyone secure we relaxed and drank a lot of water – it was easily over 90 degrees-hot and sticky, an easy place to get dehydrated.

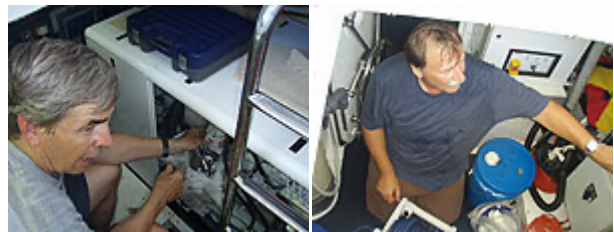


After rolling our luggage over from the hotel Jonn and I each unpacked into our new digs, luxurious individual cabins aboard the Nordhavn 62 *Seabird* and had a great dinner aboard with Steven and Carol. At Steven’s request I brought him a new US Ensign as the one he’s been flying has gotten tired. I had asked if there was anything I could bring over and it turns out that they had watched season one of the TV show “Prison Break” and were hooked, but couldn’t find season two or three in Japan so I did a little shopping stateside before the trip and got them the missing seasons. Watching movies is a great way to unwind and Steven has cobbled together a movie server using old X-box games units and I have no idea what else, but he’s cleverly come up with a huge video library that can show movies in any stateroom at a fraction of the cost of one of the Kaliedscape heavy production units. It was fun to have the evenings ending with Jonn and Steven watching some adventure flick. I’ve got to say, being a guest on *Seabird* means getting the royal treatment: my own comfy stateroom (a nice change as compared to the confined Japanese hotel room), plus some chocolate covered almonds (way better than a mint on the pillow!) and my very own *Seabird* t-shirt and GSSR ball cap. Talk about feeling like part of the team. The following couple of days involved swimming in the harbor, tending to some boat projects, renting a car for a tour of the island and some general provisioning. Jonn loved jumping off the bridge deck of *Seabird* and also discovered a sunken boat along our seawall while snorkeling!



Steven and I went over to help Ken work on his generator. Going in to town, eating meals aboard and visiting the other boats while we were all ashore was a great way to get immersed into all things GSSR and we were always welcome. There was practically an open door policy between the boats and you could tell that the bond between the crews was solid and strong. This couple of days aboard while at the dock before taking off on the trip made for a nice transition period. During my time with the GSSR I saw time after time where one boat's question would lead to the other two boats offering advice and often hopping aboard to assist manually. They were all quick to drop what they were doing and help out – illustrating nicely the general feeling that they are all in the same boat together.

Getting ready for our passage to Taiwan involved plotting the course and figuring out weather. Our weather router and weather software was reviewed and the three captains held a meeting to discuss departure times and the best course to take. We had a choice of going over the North end of Taiwan and traveling down the west coast of the island or heading for the south end of Taiwan and then rounding up to the west coast port of Tainan. Calls and emails were exchanged between the fleet and Ta Shing to discuss options and coordinate departure and arrival times. We needed to estimate our speed, determine how long it would take to get there and try to leave Japan at a time that would allow for us to arrive during daylight hours in Taiwan.



With a plan in place, we decided to be tourists one last time and rented a car for an excursion of the island. Inland we were treated to lush vegetation and even found a nice resort to have lunch – the first “restaurant” we pulled into turned out to be a weaving store – when there are pictures on the signs everyone's Japanese was a lot better! We also found a beautiful tourist beach where boats come in to offload passengers for shopping (Blue Seal ice cream is a favorite) and it appeared there were oyster beds in this area so it must have been closed to swimmers which was a real shame. It looked like an idyllic place to anchor for a couple of days.

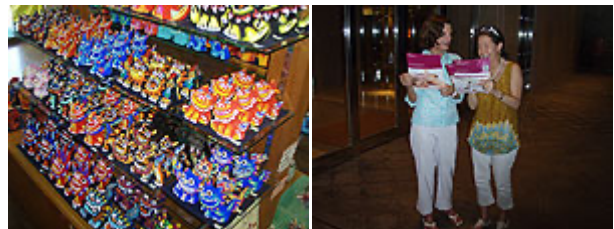
They drive on the left side of the road in Japan; Steven was the driver and Braun the navigator. The car was equipped with a navigational guidance system with a Japanese female voice offering directions...and it was driving us nuts so we drove back to the rental office and had a guy “diffuse” this so we could enjoy our tour talking amongst ourselves in English– it was a very comical experience. On the subject of languages I had to marvel at Steven. He really gets into

the local stuff, especially communicating. Whenever we would go into town he would converse in Japanese (he has a great ear for the nuance of voice inflection and learned the various basic phrases to order food, get directions, say hello and unless you really pressed him you would assume he spoke fluent Japanese.) I admire the approach of “when in Rome” and the entire GSSR group seems to have embraced the view that they are visitors exploring a different place and want to engage and digest the local culture. It’s a very important part of their experience and I think provides a very essential component of their joy in traveling. Jonn was particularly amused with Steven’s pronunciation of two American icons on the islands (7-11s and McDonalds aren’t on every corner, but they are scattered about and popular as you can imagine). If you ask a local, “Where is the 7-11?” you won’t be understood, but if you pronounce it “say-bon – ee-ray-bon” they will smile and point you in the right direction. (McD’s is “mack-uh-donaldo’s”).



We went out to dinner at the beautiful ANA Intercontinental resort and I kept thinking that Ishigaki reminds me a lot of Hawaii. The Ryukyu island chain is probably best known for the island of Okinawa and there are some spectacular places to visit in this region of Japan. The tropical environment of an island paradise even spread to tacky souvenirs from the Disney Hawaiian animation feature, *Lilo and Stitch* it sure seems the tourist industry is riding on the coattails (make that aloha shirt tails) of Hawaii. There are a lot of souvenir dragons – friendly guys in day-glow colors – I held back and didn’t purchase any...but took some photos. Carol and Roberta discovered after dinner that the Ana Intercontinental had a major league Spa so they booked massage times for all four of the ladies on the trip – a luxury that the “desperate boat wives” all felt was not only past due, but one of the perks of joining their mates on this adventure.

Grey Pearl hosted a Mexican themed cocktail party and while Wayne Davis made the margaritas the rest of us relaxed aboard *Grey Pearl* and talked about the coming short trip from Japan to Taiwan. Tina had saved some salsa, made a great guacamole and also fried chips from tortillas (the food, drink and



camaraderie were fantastic!). Wayne and Pat own the Nordhavn 35 *Envoy*, which is lying at our Portsmouth, Rhode Island sales office. Prior to that they owned a Nordhavn 46 with which they did the NAR (Nordhavn Atlantic Rally) and first befriended the Joneses and Williams. It's quite clear, the Nordhavn connection is strong.



(Keep posted for Part Two of Jeff's Taiwanese Homecoming account next week.)



Jeff Merrill is a salesman at our Nordhavn Yachts Southwest office in Dana Point, California.

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