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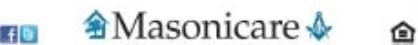
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 RETIRE

Home at sea

Sally and David Jensen aren't your average cruisers. Thirteen years ago, the former landlubbers traded their house for a sailboat and never looked back.

BY JANET KORNBLUM FOR USA TODAY



**ON SALLY
JENSEN'S 55TH
BIRTHDAY
SHE RODE
A WHALE
SHARK.**

He said, "Hey, for my birthday I'm going to ride a representative of the world's largest fish."

But when you're living out at sea, things like whale-shark riding can happen almost any time.

For many couples, retirement means traveling a bit, relaxing, and enjoying newfound free time. Some downsize and move to places where amenities are closer and easier to access.

And then there are those who go a whole different route: they move overseas. They join the Peace Corps, or just maybe, do what Sally and David Jensen did.

They picked up their lives and move onto a 39-foot boat.

For the Jensens, their choice wasn't the culmination of a lifelong plan. Rather, their sailing adventure started somewhat by happenstance: Back in 1998 Sally went to a sailing show in Oakland, Calif., not far from the Sacramento home where she and her husband worked and raised their kids. She attended a cruising (as in sailing) seminar for women.

It changed everything.



"She came out with a big grin on her face," says David, sitting with Sally overlooking a marina on a recent trip to the San Francisco Bay area. "She said, 'Let's do it,'" he laughs.

And with that, the decision was made.

On June 1, 1998, Sally sold the florist shop she loved so much. On the same day, David quit his job as special projects editor at the *Sacramento Bee* (where he was a lead editor on a series that won a Pulitzer). Understandably, June 1 is now a major day of celebration for the couple.

She sold her Toyota 4Runner. He sold what he calls his 1974 VW "Thing."

They auctioned their house and bought a 39-foot sailboat, named Hopalong, after Sally's childhood crush on the voice behind Hopalong Cassidy, William Boyd.

On Nov. 23, 1998, they set sail from San Francisco Bay, under the Golden Gate Bridge and into the

Pacific. They turned left and headed south to Mexico, leaving behind what cruisers euphemistically refer to as the dirt life.

Sally was 53. David was 55. That was 13 years ago. Now they're 66 and 68. They've been cruising ever since—mostly in Mexico and now in Panama. They fly to California every so often to visit family, including their four grandkids, aged 4 to 10.

It's all part of their retirement at sea.

Some days it feels "magical," Sally says. Like the morning of her 55th birthday when they saw three whale sharks cruise by. Sally jumped in the water, and touched the fish's back (whale sharks feed on krill, not mammals) for maybe half a second, Sally says.

"It was spectacular. That kind of contact with sea life is really great. We see whales and porpoises all the time.

"If you live on a sailboat you can wake up in the morning and jump

in the water and go swimming if you want to," she says. "You can sit outside in the morning and have a coffee. And you see this gorgeous 360-degree ocean view.

"Almost nobody gets to live like that. It's beautiful. It's terrific."

Cruising also can be incredibly social and fun. When they pull into port, they often meet other cruisers with whom they become fast friends.

"We really cherish the people that we have kept in contact with over the past couple of years," she says.

"It's kind of like being in adult day camp: You're going fishing. If you drink you're going drinking. You go to the beach. You play horseshoes. You go on tour someplace."

They've also been able to travel extensively in Mexico, playing tourist studying Spanish, and seeing the sites. Sally even volunteered in one town, teaching English.

Fishing, snorkeling, socializing, sailing—could life get any better?

Sailing near an island off of Mexico, the Jensens once encountered a humpback whale and calf.

The Jensens and Hopalong have survived two tsunamis in nearly 13 years of sailing.

But there is a flip side. Cruising isn't all whale sharks and days of shimmering fish.

The life they've chosen includes its own dangers and challenges.

The Jensens average about three hours a day of boat maintenance when they're docked. And it isn't just to make the boat pretty.

A lot can go wrong with a sailboat. There are gas leaks, which can easily lead to fire. Engines can have problems. The water maker can break down (leading to no fresh water at sea). Sails can and do tear, and the toilet can stop working (A 39-foot boat really isn't that big when you consider that the ends of the boat are pointy and the space accommodates the engine.)

But they keep it in perspective.

"Sometimes when it's really hot you have to fix something that's not a lot of fun," Sally says. "But then you think, how much fun would it be to have to mow the lawn every week? You'd be bored to death."

Like just after they set off on their

journey. When they were still in California, they got clobbered by a storm.

"If it had not been very early in our career I would've said I'm never stepping on a boat again. I thought we were going to die. I really did," Sally says.

"It wasn't that bad though," David adds.

"Oh, it was that bad," she retorts. "There was a big storm. We had to have the port people come out and help us."

"It was raining so hard," David agrees.

"We are kind of fortunate that we're past a lot of those kinds of early fears," Sally says. "I mean we've been doing it now for 13 years, which is a lot more experience than a lot of cruisers have."

"That doesn't mean we don't get afraid," adds David.

"But what it means is that you're prepared for a lot of things," Sally says. "And you don't get as worried."





Sally ziplines in Honduras



Sally and David in Mazatlan



Fishing in the Sea of Cortez

Also, both Jensens know how to operate the boat—not the case with all cruisers. If something goes wrong with one of them, the other can take over.

That's the other thing about sailing. They might go several days, even weeks, without seeing another person. The isolation can be rough.

"Everybody has a different tolerance for isolation and a different tolerance for socialization," David says. "And Sally has a greater desire for socialization."

There was the time they sailed from Mazatlan across the Sea of Cortez. The journey took three weeks. Three weeks with just the two of them, splitting shifts sailing the boat.

As soon as they anchored, they saw another boat.

"Sally jumps in the dinghy and rows over and starts talking to somebody," David says.

Living on a boat means together-

ness. A lot of togetherness.

When they were living in Sacramento, they both had jobs and were raising two children.

"Sally and I were working long hours during the day," David says. "Sometimes, she'd be doing something at night and I'd be doing something at night. Basically we didn't have all that much time together when you really think about it."

Then, he says, "all of the sudden we're thrust together, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. And it's a surprise."

"It's a real surprise," Sally adds.

"It creates certain kinds of tensions," David adds.

Like the joke.

"David has a joke he likes to tell all his new acquaintances. And really, it's a pretty funny, yet off-color old joke about a certain town in Arizona getting its name," Sally says.

Of course, he can't resist telling it

one more time, while Sally rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

When he's done, Sally turns to the interviewer. "You owe me," she says, for having to listen to the same joke "for the 5,550th time. It's a real drawback when his [whole] joke repertoire is [only] one. We meet new people all the time. It's like new fodder for him. He loves it though."

And they both laugh. If living in a confined space is challenging, at times, they seem to work it out. After all, they've been married 45 years.

There are times when they do argue, a natural thing for any couple to do. Sally likes to tell the story about the time they fought about something or other.

"We're on the boat and, you know, it's a small space," Sally says. "And I'm thinking, I want to go home. I want to go home and see my mother. Well, my mother is dead and I don't have a home. So I'm screwed," she laughs.

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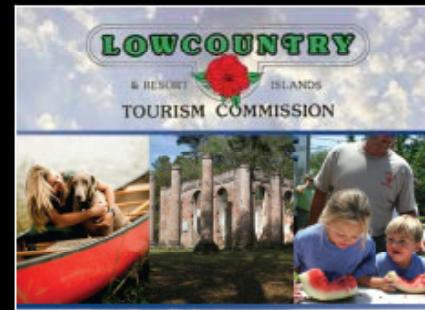


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■ Hopalong anchored in El Salvador



"So, I turned around to look at him and tell him, don't follow me into the bunk."

They both laugh at the absurdity of it. There was no other place for David to go. And before they knew it, the fight "was over and that was that," Sally says.

There was the equally emotional moment when, for Valentine's day, David secretly ordered flowers to be delivered to the boat. After a small mishap (the driver's helper failed to follow boat protocol and woke up the Jensens by standing outside their window, where they were both sleeping in the raw.) Sally was so touched, "I started to cry, cry, cry." In a good way.

While there are ups and downs, the Jensens can't imagine returning to the dirt life—at least not now.

Aside from sailing, maintaining the boat, traveling and socializing, David writes two different blogs. One (hopalongchronicles.com) chronicles their journey, and the other (*The California Stem Cell Report* at californiastemcellreport.blogspot.com).

com) is a more journalistic endeavor. They both love the stimulation they get from their life.

"Getting exposure to different cultures and different people is really wonderful," David says. "This is one of the advantages of sailing. You're always learning. Sailing itself is a challenging thing. It's more than you can possibly learn, so you keep learning. You also learn about other cultures and other societies. We studied Spanish quite a bit and we're reasonably fluent in that."

"Now we're all psyched to learn about Panama and the canal and the whole thing," Sally says. "We can choose how exciting we want it to be. We went to El Salvador for almost a year. We're hoping this summer to maybe travel to Ecuador and Peru, places like that."

"It's been a very interesting lifestyle," she adds. "I can't imagine that we would have done anywhere near the variety of things that we've done on land."

But given the fact that they're getting closer to 70, they've thought

about what will happen when they can't continue the lifestyle, physically.

"It's an active life," David says. "The real question is, if we return to what is known as the dirt life, what are we going to do? What will we do?"

"We are hard-pressed to imagine quite what we would do," adds Sally.

Plus, while the lifestyle has its pitfalls, at this point, it has a lot more high points.

"It's just magical to be that close to the ocean," she says. "Unbelievable. During the times we actually sail, there's nothing quite like being on the sailboat. When you're sailing, and it's quiet, and the boat's moving how it's supposed to move, it's just really wonderful."

"Like anything else, you don't get to do that all the time. The few times you do get to do it, it's fantastic. It's the most beautiful experience, and you think, life just doesn't get any better than that."

That's why, when asked what their future will bring, David simply replies with an old saying: "We have no plans, and we're sticking to them." ■

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