

Prairie Pirates Invade the 1500

Reprinted from the November 14, 2009 issue of Sailing Magazine

When participants in the Caribbean 1500 found themselves short-handed 20 years ago, they found willing sailors in the Midwest. These sailors, who call themselves the Prairie Pirates were looking for an opportunity for offshore sailing to warmer climes as winter set in on their home waters and they have returned year after year.

Each November, the Cruising Rally Association organizes the Caribbean 1500, an event in which cruising sailors and as many as 75 boats form a loose flotilla to sail from Hampton VA to Tortola, British Virgin Islands, in the sunny Caribbean. The CRA provides numerous benefits to the assembled cruisers including rigorous safety inspections and seminars on provisioning, medical issues, offshore engine problems, and navigational training. Each boat is equipped with a satellite transponder so that friends and family are able to track the fleet's progress.

Many cruising boats are family affairs, crewed by a husband and wife and possibly their children, or a retired couple finally living the life they have dreamed of. For some boats, the owner is moving the boat to the Caribbean to be followed later by the rest of the family. These short-handed situations are where the Prairie Pirates enter into the mix. Over the course of the 20-year history of the Caribbean 1500, the Prairie Pirates have become a significant source for sailors needed to fill out the crews for these boats.

The Prairie Pirates provide a pool of experienced crewmembers for these boats. They are used to standing watches, trimming sails, and dealing with all types of weather, both good and bad, over an extended period, while keeping a boat moving steadily toward the finish.

After nine days at sea, sailors are greeted in Tortola with a bottle of champagne. First time Prairie Pirates undergo an initiation and celebration, usually accompanied by the liberal application of dark rum as they cut the button off the top of their new Caribbean 1500 cap. In its place, they are entitled to proudly wear the Prairie Pirate logo.

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