



The boat's summer base is near Ginguite Creek in Southern Shores, but its winter dockage is on the Manteo waterfront.

A Ride Against the Tide:

The Copelands' Gibson Houseboat



BY MOLLY HARRISON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAY MATTHEWS

A Gibson houseboat is not your typical Outer Banks boat. In fact, Mark Copeland, owner of a 55-foot Gibson, has only seen one other boat like his on the Outer Banks.

People are accustomed to seeing houseboats on calm lakes, but they don't expect to see them on the coastal sounds, where the wind is such a major factor in boating. When Mark bought his Tennessee-built houseboat in Kent Island, MD, the sellers tried to warn him: "You know, you're taking that boat to the second windiest location in the nation."

Yes, Mark knew that, but he did it anyway. His Gibson houseboat is awash amongst the

sea of sportfishing boats and center-consoles and trawlers that are the Outer Banks norm, and he's heard it all from the naysayers, but the boat suits his needs just fine. The Gibson has proven to be a comfortable vessel for navigating the sounds and Intracoastal Waterway and the perfect home away from home for his family.

Buying the Gibson houseboat was not a rash decision. Mark has been going to the Annapolis boat show for years, and he and his wife, Ashley, did a lot of searching to find a live-aboard-style cruising boat to accommodate them and their two daughters, Hannah, 15, and Marley, 12. They looked at a lot of trawlers, which is the typical boat a coastal cruiser would consider.

"The trawlers were too claustrophobic," says Mark. "Unless it was huge [in length], it was too small inside. Ashley wanted plenty of room to accommodate friends and guests."

The Gibson houseboat matched their needs the best. Mark took the plunge and bought the boat in December 2005, and the family christened it *Carolina Flatop*.

At 55 feet long and 16 feet wide, the boat has plenty of room for entertaining. It sleeps eight comfortably, and when it's just the

Copeland family of four on board, everyone has plenty of room.

"Nothing compared to this on a comfort level," says Mark.

The houseboat has a king-size berth and a head in the stern, where Mark and Ashley bunk. Down below there are two queen berths plus a head in the bow, where Hannah and Marley bunk. There's a bathtub, a full kitchen, a spacious salon, a fly bridge, an ample sundeck and two helm stations. A wind inverter keeps batteries charged and refrigerator running.

"I always wanted a boat I could live on," says Mark.

Hannah says her favorite part about the boat is sleeping on it. "It's like being in a crib again," she says. "I sleep really well here."

The Copelands use the boat for traveling and for hanging out on the water near home.

In the summer months, when they aren't cruising in the boat, the Copelands keep *Carolina Flatop* moored in the Currituck Sound near Ginguite Creek, behind a neighbor's house in Southern Shores. Hannah says the boat is quite the attraction with the neighborhood kids and her friends. Teenage boys are regularly seen flipping off the top deck,



It's easy to see where *Carolina Flatop*, Mark Copeland's 55-foot Gibson houseboat, got its name.

and adults sit on the sundeck for cocktails. The kids also take the Copelands' 13-foot Whaler out to go wakeboarding and tubing.

"We do a lot of entertaining and hanging out on the boat in the summer," says Mark. "We're there almost every afternoon. Our friends boat out to meet us. We've had up to 10 boats tied up to this one at sunset. Everyone comes, drinks and eats and leaves after sunset and we stay on board."

The Copelands also take off in the houseboat, headed for distant ports of call with their Whaler in tow. They've made several trips to Ocracoke Island, about a five-hour cruise from Southern Shores, and they've spent a lot of time in Hatteras Village. They've navigated the Narrows at Coinjock, celebrated Hannah's birthday in Edenton, had harrowing experiences at the Alligator River marina and

moored off Roanoke Island Festival Park to listen to live music.

The boat, which draws only three feet of water, is perfect for navigating the sounds. And with twin 8.1 engines, she gets where she needs to go pretty quickly, at a pace of about 28 knots.

"Basically we go and drop anchor wherever we want," says Mark. "This boat is completely self-contained. We have to go in once in a while to fuel up and pump out, but the boat has a great storage for fuel and water."

The only thing the boat can't handle is a strong wind, which has led to the development of the Copeland family motto: "If it's blowin' we ain't goin'."

"The weather is the biggest thing; we have to watch the weather," says Mark. "If it's blowing 5 to 10, that's fine. 10 to 15 is OK. 15 to 20

and we stay home. Trips have been postponed, but that's OK."

Once Mark and Ashley anchored up behind Grant Island off Hatteras and waited out a blow. They were "stuck" there for three or four days and couldn't even use the dinghy. But they had plenty of supplies and had a great time, says Mark. One morning they woke up and it was calm so they high-tailed it up the Pamlico Sound, but, of course, it started blowing again before they reached Southern Shores.

The Gibson does have a V-hull, it's not a pontoon boat. But it's a shallow V, and the bow is completely flat. The shape doesn't lend itself to great motoring in the wind, but it's tolerable. The real problem with wind is docking.

Mark admits that he encountered a pretty



The Copelands wanted plenty of room to entertain, and the Gibson's spacious salon and ample decks provide the room they need.



At 55 feet long and 16 feet wide, the boat has plenty of room for entertaining. It sleeps eight comfortably, and when it's just the Copeland family of four on board, everyone has plenty of room.



The houseboat has three comfortable berths, one of which sports a king-size bed.

big learning curve when he first bought it and was learning to handle the boat.

"My first time behind the helm was quite the experience," says Mark. "I picked the boat up myself and brought it down the waterway from Maryland to the Outer Banks. At one point I was navigating through Portsmouth and the naval base at 10 p.m. in the dark with all those naval ships. That was quite an experience."

The Copelands have plenty of time for entertaining and traveling with their children, thanks to their successful Outer Banks restaurant. Outer Banks residents since the 1980s, Mark and Ashley opened the Roadside Café in Duck in 1995, and the restaurant is one of the most popular places in Duck. It has an excellent local reputation and has been featured on the Food Network and in *Gourmet* magazine.

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It's gotten to the point where the restaurant takes care of itself, and Mark and Ashley can relax.

"We rarely have to be there," says Mark, and he credits his longtime staff. "It's gotten to the point where the restaurant runs itself. I'm the janitor now."

Mark has big plans for enjoying *Carolina Flatop*. He says he needs to get a few more hours under his belt, but after that he wants to take a trip along the Intracoastal Waterway, starting with North Carolina, hitting every fishing village along the way. He says he also would like to cruise the Chesapeake Bay. Next year he hopes to motor to West Palm Beach and then make the crossing to the Bahamas for a few months. His dream trip is The Loop – up to New York state, through the Hudson River, through the Mississippi River, coming

out at Louisiana and going around Florida and back up the Intracoastal Waterway.

Mark and Hannah say Ashley is enthusiastic about all this traveling.

"She's pumped to go on all the trips," says Hannah. "She wants to retire."

Meanwhile, for the winter months, *Carolina Flatop* is docked at the Manteo Waterfront. Mark scored a spot at the end of T-dock from September to May. The family spends a lot of time on the boat in Manteo. The Manteo location is near Hannah's school, and the family often spends afternoons and weekends on the boat. Marley, who is home-schooled by Ashley, often does her schoolwork on the boat.

The sight of a houseboat at the Manteo Waterfront might be a bit surprising to some.

"What's that doing here?" people say," says Mark. "But everybody knows me now." 🐾

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