

Come One, Come All! This Gam's For You!

by Gwen Hamlin

November 2007

If it's November it must be Gam time. What's a Gam? A Gam is a "gathering of sailors at sea" and the Gam is the annual gathering of members of Seven Seas Cruising Association, better known as SSCA. Up and down the Eastern Seaboard southbound cruising sailors are turning their bows to Melbourne, Florida, to arrive by November 9. But they aren't the only folks coming. From all over the country, indeed all over the world, cruisers – both experienced and novice – come by land and air as well.

Why do so many make this pilgrimage? Where else in one weekend could you meet so many people who have actually been to that destination you've been planning a trip to or who may perhaps be in the midst of or have completed the circumnavigation you'd like to make? Where else do the seminars address the real issues cruising sailors are struggling with on a daily basis or the forums answer the questions weighing on your mind? And where else do you get a chance to meet face-to-face the people behind the books and articles you read, the software products you use, or the voices you know from the radio?

"The Melbourne Gam is a tremendous resource for people who are preparing to go cruising," says Kathy Parsons, longtime Caribbean cruiser and author of the books *Spanish for Cruisers* and *French for Cruisers*. "It's quite different than a boat show, where the emphasis necessarily is on buying and selling boats and products. At the Gam, the emphasis is on sharing information. Whether you're a woman single-handing or a family considering homeschooling, whether you'd like to earn money writing for magazines or self-publish a book, or whether you are trying to figure out how to rig your boat for European marinas or troubleshoot a communications system, you will find someone to talk to at the Melbourne Gam who is doing just that! And that's just at the cocktail parties!"

The social side of the three-day Gam – primarily the Friday night cocktail party and the Saturday night barbecue, not to mention the spontaneous gatherings of old friends and special interests (like last year's CSY-owners breakfast!) – are great opportunities for such informal contacts. But the main draw of the Melbourne Gam is its schedule of seminars, roundtables, panels and forums that focus on subjects of real practical interest. This year, for example, some of the scheduled seminars are "Using your Medical Kit with More Confidence," "Circumnavigating on a Catamaran" and "Trolling and Bottom Fishing on a Cruising Boat." There will be a panel on "Working your Boat Offshore," demos on line-splicing and watermaker installation and care, Jim Corenman's seminars on offshore communications, plus several offerings specifically aimed at women's concerns. And though the emphasis at the Gam is *not* on selling, there's no need to go home empty-handed. There's a Vendors' Hall with books and equipment of special interest to cruising sailors, as well as a Saturday morning flea market where members swap treasures from the bilge with one another.

From the start over 55 years ago, SSCA has been all about this kind of camaraderie and sharing of information, as well as about building an upstanding community of liveaboard cruisers that spans the world. It may be hard to believe now, but cruisers were once the outsiders to a sailing scene dominated by elite yacht clubs. SSCA's founding members, six cruising couples docked in the shadow of one such club, retaliated by starting their own "disorganization" in which every new member had to be not just an experienced, liveaboard cruiser, but one well-enough known to be relied upon to be an asset to the group. That was the origin of SSCA's now famous "Clean Wake" policy which has helped raise the reputation of today's sea-gypsies around the world: "ensure that the welcome mat will be out for all cruisers following in your wake." And in mockery of those elite yacht-club hierarchies, every member of their new group got to be called a "Commodore."

Today, anyone can become an SSCA member, whether already cruising or still in the dreaming stage. All members join as Associates, entitling them to fly the blue burgee. After a year of membership,

those Associates who are living aboard fulltime and have made a significant offshore passage can apply to become Commodores. Commodores fly the red swallowtail and are entitled to vote for board directors and bylaw amendments.

There's a special category - "Rear Commodore" - for retired cruisers, people who have been there, lived the life and yet, despite having swallowed the anchor, don't want to give up being part of the cruising community. They are encouraged to become mentors to those just starting out. It's this diversity, this range and interaction of experience levels, that makes the organization and its gatherings so dynamic.

SSCA is probably best known for its monthly *Commodores' Bulletin*. This unassuming half-size publication, jam-packed with informative letters by members, has probably launched more voyages and kept more cruising dreams alive than any other.

"SSCA was with us all the way from our dreaming of cruising days through our circumnavigation," says Dave Abbott of the Privilege 39 catamaran *Exit Only*, who together with his family will be presenting the "Circumnavigation Aboard a Catamaran" seminar at this year's Gam. "We first heard about SSCA in the 1980s. At the time, we were living and working in the desert lands of the Middle East. The ocean, sailing, and cruising seemed a long way away, literally, but the arrival of the *SSCA Bulletin* reminded us that people were out there on those oceans and someday we could go, too."

Sherry McCampbell, who moderated the popular roundtable on cruising websites and blogs at last year's Gam, remembers that she and her first husband just got the *Bulletins* and never went to any events. "Then we read a letter from a retiring Commodore saying they were having to move off the boat because they were too old. They said "To all you wanabees, our primary message is don't wait until you're old to go cruising. Go now while you are healthy. Work later." That kicked us in the ass and we went cruising. Within a year we had earned our miles, time aboard, and the friendship of a few Commodores who recommended us for Commodore status." Sherry and her current husband, fellow SSCA'er Dave McCampbell, both active organizers and presenters at past Gams, are currently cruising the western Caribbean aboard the CSY 44, *Soggy Paws*.

Active cruisers all over the world regularly use their *Bulletins* to plan their itineraries. "We have consistently used articles from the *Bulletin* to help us choose sights to see all across the Pacific, New Zealand, and Australia," say Dave and Kathy Blanding of the Norseman 447, *Sunflower*. "For example, the *Bulletin* was very instrumental in our decision to join the Sail Indonesia Rally this year. We'd read an article by a previous participant, who, like us, normally tries to avoid large fleets of boats. They found that the rally gave them many opportunities to do activities on their own, while still having the safety net of a group and group activities when they wanted. We have found this to be true, plus some of the rally tours have offered us sights and situations that we could not have organized by ourselves. It has been a great experience so far, and we would have missed it if not for the article in the *Bulletin*."

Keeping up with the times, SSCA now makes new issues of the *Bulletin* available to members online at their newly-designed website, www.ssca.org, a huge convenience for underway cruisers. Those who don't have mail forwarded to them can choose the WebOption to access the indexed, searchable *Bulletins* online, and receive an annual "Bulletin on CD" in lieu of paper issues. Other specialized publications, written by members for members, on subjects as diverse as "Buying a Barge in Europe" to "Ham Installation Guide," as well as a long list of area-specific reports, are also available online in a special Members' Section. There's even an online Discussion Board where anyone, member or not, can log on and seek input from experienced cruisers on boats, boat systems, equipment, maintenance issues, offshore tactics, destinations as well as more domestic subjects such as homeschooling, medical insurance, provisioning, etc. In other words, cruisers can now get timely exchange on almost any relevant subject from a much more widely experienced group of peers than can be found at the local watering hole (with a much smaller bar bill!).

Beyond the *Bulletin*, SSCA also coordinates a network of some eighty volunteer Cruising Stations around the world which ensures that members have a friend in place before they arrive. Cruising Station hosts stand by to help visiting members get oriented, find parts and services, learn about local culture, and, as is always important to SSCA'ers, meet one another at impromptu potlucks and parties.

Such casual get-togethers often take on a life of their own, becoming mini-gams and rendezvous that reoccur year after year in popular locations such as Trinidad or Puerto Vallarta, but also closer to home in Maine, Annapolis (in time for the boat show!) and Punta Gorda, Florida. "SSCA Gams are good places to meet other cruisers," says Mary Verlaque of the Camper Nicholson 40, *I Wanda*, recently returned to the U.S. from the Mediterranean. "Our favorite is the Downeast Gam held each August in Isleboro, Maine. In true cruiser tradition it is mostly about sharing food and talking about cruising. Nothing formal. Just fun!"

As much fun as FUN is, today's cruisers do seem more and more interested in the chance to attend workshops to enhance their knowledge for cruising, and SSCA supports that with specialized workshops around the country such as retired NOAA forecaster Lee Chesneau's Marine Weather Forecasting workshops, most recently offered in Annapolis, and Nigel Calder's "Coastal & Offshore Cruising" workshops held in Seattle and San Diego last summer.

Still, as valuable assets as the *Bulletin*, the website, the Gams and the workshops are, it's the personal connections made among members – whether via stops at Cruising Stations, at the various Gams, rendezvous and workshops; or just by pulling alongside a boat flying one of the SSCA burgees – that distinguishes the organization. "We have met so many wonderful people through flying the burgee," say Jane Lothrop and Harry Hungate of the Corbin 39, *Cormorant*, who left the dock in July 1997 and are now in SE Asia. "Some see our Commodore flag and are seeking sponsorship as Commodores; others just come by to say hi. In fact, before we even left the dock in Annapolis, we got a visit from Beth Leonard who was nearby building their new boat, because we had our flag up!"

So if you are a cruiser at any stage of your career, SSCA is an organization that exists for you, and there's no better way to become involved – or to get involved again – than by making your way to **THE GAM** (also known as the SSCA Annual Convention) at Eau Gallie Civic Center, Melbourne, Florida, November 9-11. You can pre-register online at www.ssc.org so you'll have meals and tickets to the parties or you can pay at the door. Even if you can't make it, you can, of course, join online and start receiving the *Commodores' Bulletin* immediately! Then hoist that burgee and be part of one of cruising's proudest communities!

Reprinted with permission from *Latitudes & Attitudes*