

Cruisers' Potluck Thanksgiving in St. Marys at the Riverview Hotel

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As the hurricane season began to wane my husband Clint and I turned our attention to getting our beloved Contour 34 trimaran, Tri Dreaming, from the Chesapeake to her new port in Florida. Although we have a trailer, we found ourselves wanting to plan a trip as if we were "snowbirds" heading south for the winter. What better way to experience the cruising life than to move our boat when hundreds of cruisers are traveling the ICW? Realizing that we would be

traveling over the Thanksgiving holiday I wanted to experience one of the traditional cruisers' potluck Thanksgiving I have read so much about. Perhaps the largest is in St. Marys, Ga., where hundreds of cruisers gather not for the food, but for the people.

The tradition began 12 years ago when a small group of cruisers tucked into St. Marys to wait out a nor'easter over Thanksgiving. Local resident and avid sailor Charlie Jacobs knew how difficult it was to prepare even a small turkey breast aboard a boat, and he didn't want the sailors to miss out on the holiday meal. He asked [Riverview Hotel](#) owners Jerry and Gailia Brandon if they would open their lounge for a cruisers' potluck. With Jacobs cooking a turkey, other townspeople providing food and supplies, and the cruisers bringing the side dishes, a tradition was born. As word spread about the warm hospitality, the event began to grow to numbers no one ever imagined.

Ann Barr and Lynn Harden arrived in 2004 to spend their first Thanksgiving in St. Marys and have been coming back ever since. Always raising their hands to help out, they found themselves in the Cruisers Coordinator role several years ago and once again this year. Their job is to get a rough head count of the cruisers coming in and organize the side dishes.

When I called Ann to get more information, I was enthralled by her stories about past events and the generosity of others. She said the townspeople of St. Marys are the true center of this now week-long event.

David and Judy Johnsen of Read'em Again bookstore are some of the special locals who have welcomed the cruisers to their town with open arms. They host a very popular book exchange for the cruisers complete with muffins and coffee.

Rocky Smith, owner of the marina in town where many of the cruisers have work done during the week, hosts a happy hour as a way to give back to the cruisers.

Then there's Craig Miller who makes five gallons of homemade gravy every year, or Charles Culp who leaves the keys in his old car for the cruisers to use during the week to run errands.

Then there are Jerry and Gaila "who literally turn their hotel over to the cruisers," says Ann. In September, the couple and their hotel were named the Seven Seas Cruising Association's "Cruising Station of the Year." Last year the Brandons hosted an Oyster Roast on Thanksgiving Eve where four bushels of oysters were consumed by hundreds of cruisers and townspeople.

Thanksgiving Day volunteers transform the lobby of the Riverview Hotel into a banquet hall with enough donated turkey and ham to feed an army. The cruisers then arrive with their side dishes and desserts with enough variety for even the most finicky eater. "Cruisers bring what they can afford to bring," Ann says. She recognizes that there are all levels of cruising budgets. "Some only have a can of peas to share while others bring elaborate sides and desserts." At the end of the day this is not about the meal but the people you celebrate it with.

As I ended my call with Ann I felt as if she had just read an old sailing story about some far away island and the welcoming nature of the natives. It was good to know that right here on the east coast of the good ole' USA there is still a town full of people who open up their hearts for strangers and treat them like family.