

East Coast Cruising Adventure 2025

I have a friend, Dick, that owns a sailboat – a nice one. The boat's name is Pilgrim; she is an Island Packet 420, a very well laid out and sturdy yacht, almost 45 feet long, weighing about 15 tons, with a long keel. Pilgrim was made about the turn of the century, and Dick has owned her for over twenty years. She has successfully competed in a number of long offshore races on the Gulf Coast, but these days Dick keeps her in a slip at Hilton Head, South Carolina and uses her for cruising. She has been so well-maintained that she looks almost new, both inside and out and everything on board that matters works, which is almost unique in my boating experience. Dick does things right.

Dick invited me and an old friend of his, Greg, to join him for a weeklong cruise of the Georgia coast in Pilgrim. Both Greg and Dick are very experienced watermen, both with sail and powerboats. Perhaps the crew was a bit too experienced as I was the youngest member. Having an older crew has a lot of advantages, but things do tend to happen a bit more deliberately, as our formerly agile bodies have slowed down, and there was a lot of 'What did you say?' called out as our hearing is also not what it once was.



Pilgrim in her home marina



Pilgrim's very comfortable salon

My flight from Houston to Savannah was uneventful, which is what you want a commercial flight to be. Dick was waiting for me at the pleasant little Savannah airport and drove me the hour-long trip to Windmill Marina in Hilton Head where Greg awaited us aboard Pilgrim. The first thing we did was make a quick run to the grocery store and pick up essential supplies. Dick and Greg have done this so many times that they got everything we needed and little that we did not. They had such a good feeling about our requirements that not only did we lack for nothing on our cruise, but we also had a little left at the end. As I said, it is a good thing to have experienced mariners in the crew. That night we retired early as we would throughout the cruise. Dick took the forward stateroom, Greg had the aft one, and I

bunked on the comfortable settee in the main cabin. As I was always the first one up, this arrangement worked well.

We were underway just before 0800 the next morning. Dick had meticulously planned our itinerary and the first day was the longest. We would motor down Mackay Creek to the May River, past Daufuskie Island, (more on that unique island later) and out the Atlantic Ocean. To exit the marina, you had to go through a little lock, designed to help shelter the marina from the effects of the region's eight-foot tides. Those tides would play a big role in our journey. It seemed like no matter where we went, in order to get there on time we would always have to do so in the face of a tidal current.



The lock entrance to Windmill Marina



Captain Dick at the helm

Dick had hoped to do some sailing once we got out of the restricted waters but alas to sail you need wind and there was little of that to be had. We tried. I was astonished at how advanced boat designs have become. Pilgrim is perfectly laid out with all the lines running to winches just in the right spots. Everything could be done without leaving the cockpit. The mainsail used roller furling so that hoisting the main was actually unrolling it from the mast. This is much easier the hauling up as was once required. Not only are the winches controlling the sheets self-tailing, but they are electric. This means that I did not need to use a winch handle to crank in the sheets, I merely pushed a button, and a powerful hidden electric motor silently tightened the sails. This was most welcome. Pilgrim is easy to sail, but without much wind, we had to continue to motor on as we had a long way to go to our first stop. Eventually we abandoned our efforts to use the wind, retracted the sails, and headed up the Ogeechee River.

The Georgia Sea Island coastline is a ragged thing, with dozens of inlets, creeks, bayous, rivers, islands, sloughs, and every other body of water a thesaurus could describe. There are dozens, if not scores, of little backwater places to explore, which is part of the reason

Dick likes to cruise this area. Once we were settled down Dick turned the helm over to me as he knows I love to drive boats. Although Dick would take the helm for docking and in the trickier parts of the channels most of the time he let me drive, which pleased me no end. Just as I found the sail rigging to be advanced, so, too was the steering. There was a clear display with the current electronic chart displayed on a screen with an icon on our boat in the middle, just like you might see in your car's navigation system. Unlike a car, the nav system showed navigational markers, outlined the channel, and displayed the charted depths of the water at mean low tide. Instead of having to use the big wheel, you could select the autopilot which would place a line on the electronic chart. You could alter course by pushing a button to alter course port or starboard. The system was very easy to use. There was a big red button that allowed you to deactivate the autopilot so you could turn the boat the old-fashioned way by steering with the wheel. The electronic chart was extremely useful as the land was often low flat salt marsh, with few landmarks. I found myself relying on the display as it was very hard to see the route the channel was leading until you were close. I would motor toward what looked to be a reedy mud bank until I could visually pick out the channel opening. I learned to rely on the chart to keep me safely in the channel.



Driving Miss Pilgrim



Greg taking in the scenery

The Ogeechee River is frankly not much of a river. It is a narrow, shallow, twisty thing. The water is dark and silty with muddy banks of low marsh grass. The Intercoastal Waterway has adequate navigation markers and is relatively straightforward to navigate but the Ogeechee River lacks these aids to navigation. I was driving in the middle of the channel with the chart showing 12 feet of water and the fathometer showing 9 feet when suddenly Pilgrim slowed abruptly. I had run onto an uncharted mud bank. Fortunately, it was a very

small hump and Pilgrim moved off of it without even coming to a stop. It was a warning that the channels depths in these murky waters frequently shift and change.

Our destination was Ft McAllister Marina, located near the state park of the same name. As we neared the marina, the channel became increasingly, challenging and Dick took over the helm. I went below to put on my shoes. When I popped back up through the companionway, I immediately noticed we had stopped moving. We had run aground within sight of the marina in waters where the chart indicated eight feet of water. Dick tried to get us off the mud but with the falling tide we were stuck. Of course, Dick had towing insurance, so he made a call. The dispatcher told Dick that he would have to wait until the tide came back in, about three hours.

There was nothing to be done but to retreat back into the air-conditioned salon and wait. A couple of hours later the towboat arrived and gently pulled Pilgrim off the mud flat and then led us around to the real channel to the marina. Following his directions we passed with plenty of water beneath our keel where the electronic chart indicated it was too shallow. Oh, well. The 'marina' was not much, just a bar and grill with a dock. We moored and climbed up to the restaurant, the Fishtale, and had a nice meal – shrimp and other local seafood. There was nothing else to do in Ft. McAllister, so we went back to the boat and turned in for the night. In the morning, I went for a brief walk, but there really wasn't much there except for views of salt marshes and lots of horseflies.



Getting tugged off the uncharted bank A typical sunset on the trip. Nice sunrises, too

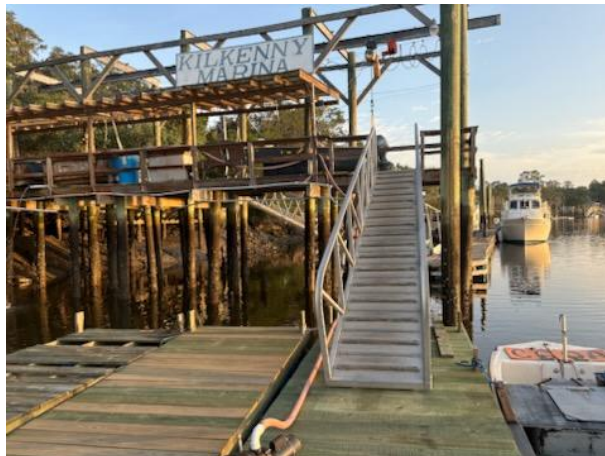
The next morning, we carefully navigated back the way we had come in and headed south to our next stop, Kilkenny Marina. Kilkenny is very pretty. In fact, the huge live oak trees covered with Spanish Moss reminded me strongly of my boyhood home of Jacksonville. Because of the tidal range, almost all docks in this area are floating docks which rise and fall with the tides. Instead of a boat ramp, they put boats in the water using hoists. That

night we dined at Marker 107, a nice restaurant. Once again, we dined on shrimp, oysters and other delicious local dishes. The next morning, I took a nice little walk beneath the spreading oaks, only mildly harassed by horseflies. It was a weekend and there were lots of locals putting in fishing boats. I commented to a woman about the horseflies. She just laughed.

“It is a small price to pay for living in paradise.”

I turned and looked out over the salt flats cut by turgid streams and thought to myself that we each make our own paradise.

Our next port of call was Sunbury. Again, this was a completely different type of marina. The docks were separated from the shore by a couple of hundred yards of salt marsh, a concrete walkway connected the very nice floating docks to the shore where the restaurant, the Sunbury Crab Company was located. Dick was most enthusiastic about sampling a combination steamed seafood platter he had tried on a previous visit. Alas, the waitress informed us that due to heavy demand they were out of both crabs and oysters. Instead, we shared a load of steamed shrimp which were quite good.



The boat hoist and entrance to Kilkenny.



The Sunbury 'Crab less' Co. Restaurant

The next morning, we were off again for our next leg of the journey to the Isle of Hope. We had an established routine by now. We would depart based on Dick's calculations on transit time and cruise sedately through the waters of barrier islands arriving midafternoon. While cruising we would read or watch the passing scenery. Although much of it was flat salt marsh grass, there were also sections of timbered shores, sometimes with expensive houses lining the shore. I was struck once again just how wealthy the United States is. This was not some famous millionaire's enclave, but we passed miles and miles of lovely and very expensive vacation homes. There are a vast number of really rich people in the United States. Sometimes, we would chat with fellow boaters, many of whom were on quite

extended cruises of a month or more, much like landbound RV'ers. A few claimed to be attempting the Great Loop, navigating all the way up the East Coast, then taking canals up to the Great Lakes, passing through Chicago and then down the Mississippi to the Gulf, a trip of some 6000 miles. In the evenings, we would read or watch movies. There were some naps involved. Basically, we did just what we wanted to do. It was both relaxing and satisfying.

Isle of Hope was once again different from our previous marinas. The town was founded by residents of Savannah during the Yellow Fever epidemics as a refuge from the plague. It remains a wealthy enclave with many fine homes and quiet streets overshadowed by enormous live oak trees.



Isle of Hope upscale Marina office



Part of my exploratory bike ride on the Isle

The marina, which was much more upscale than our previous stops' offered the use of bicycles to tour the area. I was intrigued by the architectural differences between the older houses and those built after the widespread introduction of air conditioning. Older homes had galleries, lots of windows, and high ceilings, making the newer homes look squat and unwelcoming. There were no nearby restaurants and though the marina offered loaner cars to get to the local eateries, we chose to dine aboard Pilgrim that night on Dick's fantastic chilidogs.

The following day we made the short run to Thunderbolt Marina, just south of Savannah. Once again, we had a very different type of marina. This one catered to big yachts. I was awed by some of the 80'+ racing sailboats. In addition, there was an attached boat yard doing work on a number of high-end yachts. One of these yachts was so large, +200 feet, that we initially mistook it for a building. We arrived early enough to go to lunch at a local restaurant. Dick sweet talked the marina manager into borrowing a car to drive as the sun

was fierce and we did not want to walk in the heat. After a lovely lunch we returned to Pilgrim to lounge around, and yes, take naps. I finished reading my second book.



Thunderbolt marina and boatyard

Photos do not do justice to this glorious yacht

The mariners here were more involved in big sailboat offshore racing. I was fascinated by an absolutely lovely wooden sailboat on the other side of the pier. Her professional crew were justifiably proud of her and her racing record. Maintenance on a wooden boat that large is a full-time job for several men. All in all, it was quite a change from the fishing boats and sturdy, well-worn cruising trawlers we had been around earlier in the cruise.

The next day was our last day of transit. We headed northeast back toward Hilton Head. We passed on the inland side of Daufuskie Island. It is a true island without automobiles; if you do not have a boat access is limited to a very expensive ferry. People get around on the island in golf carts or bicycles. Dick has visited there to eat at one of the three restaurants on the island. His impression was that the people there were truly insular. Like most islands, it is also very expensive to live there. I have always been fascinated by islands and island lifestyle; I understand how those who wish to withdraw from the hurley burley of the world or, like John Mellencamp, avoid annoying snoopers.



A view of some of the waterway homes



Pilgrim at rest

The wind had picked up as we approached our home berth at Windmill marina. Dick demonstrated his ship handling expertise by skillfully bringing Pilgrim into the narrow lock with a 20-knot tailwind. I was prepared to do the normal work involved with putting a boat right after a cruise but to my astonishment, Mark, the man Dick employed to tend to Pilgrim in his absence showed up to take care of everything. Watching him work I realized the difference between an amateur and professional boatman. We gratefully sat back and watched him efficiently take care of almost everything. That evening we went to the South Carolina Yacht Club dining room for a final celebratory dinner. The next day, Dick drove us all to the airport for our routine plane ride home.

This cruise was wonderfully different than any I had previously taken. Carefully planned, we visited a wide variety of (mostly) backwater marinas and local restaurants, seeing places I would never have discovered without a boat. Pilgrim is immaculate and extremely comfortable. She is also a real pleasure to drive, and I was delighted that Dick gave me a chance to conn her through some of the intricate waterways of the Georgian Sea Islands. It was a truly unique and highly enjoyable experience.