

# WINTERING IN DETROIT



by Captain Ziggy

Fear and loathing east of 8 Mile.

Being a live aboard in Detroit is a hardy endeavor. I'm not alone in my living preference with several marinas along Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River offering winter dockage. Living year round on my sailboat for over a decade has taught me a lot of tricks to make the harsh winters livable. I have come to enjoy the winters almost as much as the summers on the boat.

Everyone has their reasons why they are wintering on their boat and most winter boater's stories start with, "well right after the divorce," Having never been married my crossover was by choice.

My conversion into the liveaboard lifestyle happened many years ago. My home port was in Port Huron,

Michigan on the southern end of Lake Huron. I was always intrigued by the thought and after a night of cocktails with the liveaboards of my yacht club and a drunken "double dog dare ya," I decided to try it out.

Two years later I got rid of my land dwelling since I hadn't used it since moving on board, making the lifestyle conversion complete. That marina eventually dropped winter dockage so I had to migrate south fifty miles to Harrison, Michigan just north of Detroit. There I found a small community of liveaboards wintering at Markely Marine and quickly felt right at home. The marina bubbles dozens of boats for the winter in covered and open wells but only about a half a dozen are inhabited. Liveaboards come and go over the years with the core base now being myself and an airline pilot with a sailboat and a divorce story.

The main difficulties in wintering in Michigan are of course the ice and cold along with the constant winds blowing off the big lake. The water level drops a few feet over the winter and fluctuates with the wind direction.

In Port Huron the docks were deep enough to allow us to back into the dock making boarding easier, but here the shallow water depths of Lake St. Clair force you to bow in making you walk the long icy plank to board the boat. This makes the dock part of the winter prep also. I've known a couple of liveboards over the years that fell to their death in the icy waters making it a valid concern.

With years of trial and error I have come up with what I feel works the best over the winter. When done right wintering is as much fun as the summer. In the winter everyone wants to hear your story while out socializing but come summer you're just another idiot with a boat. People are drawn to the frontier-like adventurism of living in the ice water, that and I'm always being asked about the lack of property taxes.

The boats are kept from being iced in with the use of bubblers. The science is simple: raising the warmer water from the bottom up to the surface keeps the water from freezing...much. I originally used an electric powered propeller system when I had to provide my own bubblers but here at Markely the marina provides air compressor

powered airlines full of tiny holes providing air bubbles. These are hung around our boats giving the needed water lift. The result is a constant drone of aquarium like bubbling noise that lulls you to sleep at night.

The system of choice for the winter is to build a framework over the top of the deck using arches of plastic irrigation tubing and shrink wrapping it into a large clear dome. This allows you to be able to freely walk around on deck and acts like a greenhouse during the day and a wind block all night.

No matter what the outside temps are if the sun is shining the deck will hold a steady 80 to 85 degrees letting you open the hatches and companionway for a summer-like feel. You can adjust the temperature by adjusting vents to your liking.

We have a tradition over the years we call Bloody Mary Sunday where friends drop by and enjoy an afternoon cocktail on deck wearing shorts and T-shirts and listening to our favorite retro lounge music. We are surrounded by ice fishermen sitting on their buckets freezing while we sit only a few feet away happy to wipe the sweat off our brow. I have even had several New Year's Eve parties on board over the years.

I build a dog house over the companionway resembling an outhouse that allows the use of the boat's hatchway door

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whenever I like but also gives me a house-like door past that making it easier to pass up onto deck into the new sun room. I have a plywood section with another swinging door cut into it set along the toe rail to allow easy access to the dock where I sometimes also hang a step or two depending on the water levels.

The dock usually receives a similar treatment with a primitive 2x4 frame and shrink wrap with a plywood entry door at the head of the dock and an open area along side of the boat's doorway. This keeps the ice off the dock and the walk to the shore warm and drama free.

If the dock isn't covered from the weather many make the rookie mistake of keeping the dock shoveled. This allows the dock to become icy and very dangerous. The trick is to leave the snow and work a path down the center. This keeps you from slipping off the side of the narrow dock.

The biggest enemy of winter living is condensation. If you don't run a de-humidifier the inside of your boat will quickly become a wet moldy tropical zone. This problem is compounded by the use of a 10,000 btu vent-less propane wall heater that I and many liveaboards use during the winter months. I remove the compass from my bulkhead leaving the opening for ventilation and use a CO2 detector to monitor the heater fumes. I have yet to have a problem with this system.

My C&C Ontario Yachts Viking 33 takes about a twenty pound tank of propane a week to keep toasty warm. That

works out to about \$15 a week in propane. I also use a couple of small electric space heaters to heat up the corners and provide a redundant heat source in case one gives out for some reason.

Water is supplied by filling the tank using five gallon water jugs. The lack of pump out access makes the marina's facilities the primary bathroom during the winter months. For men that isn't a real problem being able to utilize the dock at night and the tried and true jug during the day but it is a consideration for the women. The head's holding tank is for emergency use only, i.e. the middle of the night or if she's real cute.

It takes a buddy or two and a couple of weekends to convert the boat to winter mode and back once you have all the goodies stockpiled from past winters. I actually wish spring would hold off longer come March because I've settled into the winter routine. It seems that once you get everything just the way you want it it's time to tear it all off again.

The first sign of spring is seeing the liveaboards crawling out of bed to cut large vent holes into the shrink wrap to let the 130+ degree air out the first morning the temps get up in the mid 40s.

Anyone can live on a boat in warmer climates, but it takes a hardy person to look forward to living in the ice.

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