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CONNECTED CRUISERS SHARE THE LIVEABOARD DREAM

The Palmer family aboard their Nordhavn 55 in the Exumas

story KIM KAVIN

Reality Check

BY FILMING THEIR LIVEABOARD EXPERIENCES, THESE YOUTUBERS ARE INTRODUCING THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE TO THE CRUISING LIFESTYLE.

BROOKE PALMER

For Chris and Jolene Knapp, it all started with relatives in Oregon. The couple wanted to keep their family members up-to-date about life with their three boys in Texas, so they started making videos to share.

"We had a small little cabin cruiser, and we would stay weekends on different lakes all throughout Texas, where we're from," Jolene says.

Today, the family is known as the Wandering Knapps, which is the name of the YouTube channel Chris and Jolene created. After about two and a half years, the channel has about 8,500 subscribers who watch their liveaboard life unfurl aboard a 1987 47-foot Marine Trader Tradewinds trawler. Chris and Jolene have posted close to 200 videos so far, as well as built a companion website, Facebook page and Patreon account where fans can become subscribers for $10 to $50 a month, receiving increasing levels of benefits. Sometimes, fans will send Chris and Jolene gifts from their Amazon Wish List. Other times, fans will send cash through PayPal or Venmo, to help them keep their liveaboard lifestyle alive.

"It's enough to provide an incentive to keep going," Jolene says. "It is my goal in another year that it would cover all of our costs, but right now we're probably at a third of covering our costs."

And they're far from alone. The Wandering Knapps is just one among several YouTube channels that have become not just a brand, but a driver in creating a new type of digital-based liveaboard community. There's also Brooke and Braden Palmer, whose 24,000 YouTube subscribers tune in at the Aboard Mermaid Monster channel to watch them live aboard a Nordhavn 55 with their kids. And there's Billy Swezey and Sierra Growth of the Tula's Endless Summer channel, which has about 142,000 subscribers glued to their adventures living aboard a 1988 Crowther Spindrift catamaran.

Each of these YouTube channels offers a real-life window into what it's actually like to become a liveaboard cruiser. The stories these couples are telling are sometimes so compelling, they inspire other people to take to the water as well. Yes, a percentage of the viewers are simply living vicariously through these YouTubers, but in other cases, the channels are building what crosses over into a real-life cruising community.

"We've had boats come by and introduce themselves as we're at anchorage, and they'll thank us for certain videos: Thank you for sharing this, it helped us in this situation, or checking into this island, or whatever," Chris says. "That's been kind of neat, meeting the people. It's funny, they walk up like they know us."

Braden has had similar experiences, including with people who went on to become liveaboard boaters themselves.

"I don't know if it's an insult or if it's a compliment, but they always say, 'You know what? I was watching this video, and I figured if you guys can do it, I can do it too, and then we decided to go for it,'" he says. "That's what a lot of people tell us. They saw the videos before they bought a boat."

Facing page: *Neverland*, the 1973 Marine Trader trawler the folks known as Tula's Endless Summer bought in 2015. **Above:** Penn Palmer, whose parents created Aboard Mermaid Monster. **Below:** Billy Swezey, Sierra Growth and Jetty of Tula's.

Keeping it real

All three couples say they became liveaboard cruisers first, and then YouTubers second. Along the way, they've experienced a constant evolution when it comes to what each of them is willing to put online for the world to see. They don't always agree on what should remain private, and they try to err on the side of offering compelling content without harming their personal relationships—or making themselves look silly.

"In the beginning of it, I was thinking, Don't show that. If you show that, we're going to look crazy. Maybe people are going to think, That was a bonehead move; why did he do that?" Braden says.

But then, he realized that authenticity was the key to bringing viewers to the YouTube channel. Living aboard a boat is complex, and that complexity can make for compelling viewing, including when an owner-operator just plain screws something up. "Even the most experienced people fall victim to that now and again," he says.

Jolene says that she's constantly looking out for the feelings of one of her boys, who doesn't like to have everything filmed and uploaded for public consumption. She also doesn't show her three boys fighting, or film interactions with new people. "I don't know if they're comfortable on film or not," she says.

Brooke, too, says that she has learned to put the camera down—sometimes surprising Aboard Mermaid Monster fans who think she goes about her day filming every minute of it.

"Film it and then put your camera away. Enjoy your life," she says. "Don't always have your camera out and ready. It's obnoxious, and you'll burn out. You'll have to go through all that footage."

Learning the technology

Combing through video footage is something all three couples have had to learn to do as they create episodes that sometimes rival reality TV shows in production quality, with scene transitions, overlaid typography and more.

Brooke taught herself how to use Adobe Premiere Pro editing software—"I wanted to rip my hair out for a few months trying to learn that program, but now it's a breeze and it's amazing"—and added the skill to her existing fundamentals in photography. She's now working on learning animation, to overlay things like a cartoon version of Braden that can pop in and out of the family's videos.

Sierra, for about four years, shot and edited everything on her iPhone. Billy had taken a video production class in high school, and those skills plus basic editing software were enough to get their channel up and running.

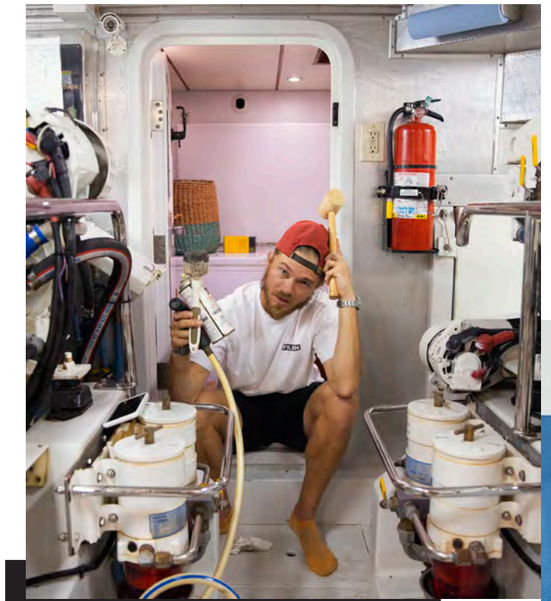
Jolene shoots everything on her Samsung Galaxy smartphone, and uses free apps on the phone for all of her channel's editing.

"I have added in a GoPro and a drone that download straight to my phone, and then I edit with free apps from my phone, and I upload to YouTube from my phone," Jolene says. "I don't use any bells and whistles at all. I promise you, if I can do it, anybody can do it."

All three couples say their goal is to tell their personal story in a compelling way. They think about episode themes and good video titles that will catch people's attention, and they watch the back-end viewer analytics to help them figure out what people want to see more of, or less of, in their narratives.

"You have to tell a story," Chris says. "You can't just take the raw footage of something you did and put it out there. People have a really short attention span. Stuff we used to show a minute of, we'll show 10 seconds of now."

Facing page, top left: The Wandering Knapps in the Exumas, Bahamas. Parents Chris and Jolene Knapp say their three boys, Carter, Chase and Caleb, had a fun time at Pig Beach with a family that followed them online. **Facing page, bottom:** Sierra Growth of Tula's Endless Summer, showing that maintenance is a part of the liveaboard life.



"They always say, 'You know what? I was watching this video, and I figured if you guys can do it, I can do it too, and then we decided to go for it.' That's what a lot of people tell us. They saw the videos before they bought a boat."

– Braden Palmer

"A lot of the people we've met along the way, a lot of our best friends, they're people we know on social media first."

– Billy Swezey

Making money

And yes, all three couples are making money—at least a little money—doing this. Each YouTube channel has become like the hub of a wheel, with spokes that branch out into blogs, online merchandise sales and more.

For Billy and Sierra, the Tula's Endless Summer brand is now their full-time job. They also earn money by fixing up and selling the boats they live aboard, but as long as they keep their liveaboard lifestyle to anchoring out and catching their own food, their YouTube-inspired brand pays for their cruising expenses.

"It covers everything," Sierra says. "It's YouTube, Patreon, selling T-shirts in our store—we've essentially created this entire brand from our YouTube videos. We can't spend every night in a marina, but if we anchor out, yeah, we can keep going."

Chris and Jolene aren't quite there with income from the Wandering Knapps brand yet, but they are continually astonished that fans will ask how to send them cash to keep their YouTube channel going.

"We've had people reach out to us and say they want to help us—usually it's when we break something," Chris says. "We point them to Patreon. It's amazing that perfect strangers will call us up or email us and say, 'I want to give you money.'"

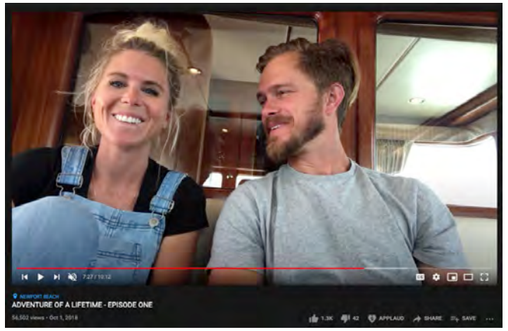
Brooke says that she and Braden aren't living off their earnings from Aboard Mermaid Monster, but the money coming in does cover some cruising expenses. And, Braden says, they're finding value in ways that go beyond dollars and cents.

"When you go into port or into a dock or a marina, you already have instant credibility. You get a little bit of street cred automatically," Braden says. "People already feel like they know you, so it makes it easier to make friends."

That ability to make friends easily, all three couples say, is the most rewarding part of what they're doing. Sometimes, those friends will become fellow liveaboard cruisers, and other times, they'll remain online forever, but either way, the sense of community is palpable.

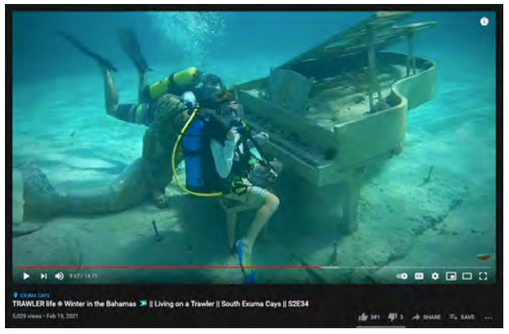
"I think we have a good variety of people that are looking to retire and are thinking about how they're going to do it and how they're going to make it possible and looking forward to it," Sierra says, "and then I think we also have another group of people that have always wanted to, but they'll never get to, and they get to kind of experience it through us—with us, really."

It's almost as if, just as Chris and Jolene started out, they're all making videos to share with family. Only now, the family has become the whole world.



Brooke Palmer of Aboard Mermaid Monster started publishing videos three or four months after moving aboard. Today, it's one video each week.

Sierra Growth of Tula's Endless Summer tries to post new videos two or three days each week. The first video went live in 2014.



Jolene Knapp of The Wandering Knapps started posting videos two and a half years ago. So far, she has uploaded about 200 videos.