

Nudist Profile

Rusty And Vanessa Grin & Bare It

By Pete Williams

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla.—For years, Rusty Barcelona and his wife, Vanessa, would head out on their boat to Passage Key, the popular nudist gathering spot in Tampa Bay between St. Petersburg and Bradenton.

They'd drop anchor off shore and soon they'd be surrounded by other familiar nudist boaters, many of whom displayed flags of the "Passage Key Yacht Club." Someone would post a volleyball net in the water, and a spirited game would begin.

It was a virtual island paradise in the midst of the nation's 13th-largest market, one known for its many AANR clubs in Pasco County. On a warm weekend day, more than 100 boats anchor alongside Passage Key; traffic can triple during holiday weekends. The area is patrolled by sheriff boats from three counties, along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but nudism is tolerated.

In recent years, Rusty and Vanessa wondered if there would be a market for a clothing-optional charter service.

"Passage Key has always been a best-kept secret kind of place," Vanessa says. "But now that more people are finding out about it through the Internet, it's getting more popular."

Last year, the couple purchased a larger boat, a 34-foot trawler, and launched Grin & Bare It Charters, catering to nudists. Rusty, 41, is a licensed captain and Vanessa, 44, serves as first mate and cook. The boat can take up to 10 passengers and departs from Gulfport in southern St. Petersburg.

"It's one of the few places you can drop anchor and go nude without getting harassed," Rusty says. "With the amount of nudists in the area, we figured there were plenty that would like to go out to Passage Key but didn't have access to boats."

The leisurely trip to Passage Key takes about 90 minutes, and it's possible to be nude within a half hour, once free of heavy non-nudist boating traffic. Along the way, boaters often see dolphins, turtles, and stingrays.

The trawler is a stable, comfortable boat that provides an easy ride. Unlike many boats of comparable size, it's possible to lie on the deck while the Grin & Bare It is moving. Vanessa likes to refer to it as her "wine and cheese boat" since it's usually possible to enjoy a glass of wine without worrying about spills.

"You don't get thrown across the water, which is nice," Vanessa says. "You won't break any records getting to where you're going, but it gives you a comfortable ride."

Vanessa creates a lunch, appetizer, or dinner menu based on input from the clients, who rave about her efforts.

"I do whatever people want," she says. "I seem to be good at picking recipes that people tend to like."

Grin & Bare It Charters offers half-day (four-hour), full-day (seven-hour), and sunset cruises. Since there's only a modest price difference between the half-day and full-day rate, most guests opt for the full-day option. Rusty and Vanessa provide food, water, and non-alcoholic beverages. Guests can bring their own alcohol. The only things they must bring are towels and plenty of high-SPF sunscreen to protect against the sun.

Many nudist clients hear about the charters through the company's Web site: www.grinandbareitcharters.com. The company also does non-nudist charters, boating to destinations other than Passage Key. Water temperatures in Tampa Bay are comfortable for swimming from early May until at least mid-October. The charters operate all year.

"We went out New Year's Eve and it was very pleasant," Rusty said.

The couple first experienced nude recreation at Passage Key during the mid-1990s. After dropping anchor, a fellow boater swam over nude and introduced himself.

"He asked us to come over and meet everyone and we were reluctant at first," Rusty said. "He told us we could keep our suits on, but in no time we were comfortable."

Rusty and Vanessa, who have been married for three years and together for 13, have visited one of the Pasco County nudist resorts, as well as the Cypress Cove Resort & Spa in Kissimmee. Since Cypress Cove owners Dean and Barbara Hadley make regular trips to Passage Key, many boaters have ventured over to "The Cove."

"We'd like to get out to clubs more often, but we're basically on the water every weekend," Rusty says.

The couple hopes the charter boat business can flourish to the point where it can become a full-time endeavor. For now, they continue to work full-time in Tampa—Rusty in sales, Vanessa in accounting—and take charter groups out on weekends.

They do make an occasional exception. On a recent weekday afternoon in June, the couple hosted a group of eight AANR youth ambassadors, who were meeting at the Lake Como Family Nudist Resort as part of AANR's annual training program for future nudist leaders. Joined by an AANR staff writer and Sabrina Vizzari, a former manager at several AANR clubs, they had the island all to themselves for the day.

Besides working as captain, first mate, and chef, Vanessa and Rusty also serve as tour guides. They've collected several old maps and photos of Passage Key and often are called upon during trips to explain the history of the island.

Passage Key was one of the first national wildlife refuges. When established early in the 20th century, it was a mangrove island



AANR members (above) grin and bare it with hosts Rusty and Vanessa (right).



with a fresh water lake, farmhouse, and island caretaker. A hurricane in 1920 severely damaged the island, leaving only 30 acres.

Still, that was more than enough to serve as a habitat for numerous exotic water birds, including laughing gulls, royal terns, black skimmers, sandwich terns, brown pelicans, and oyster catchers. For more than eight decades, Passage Key was a roosting and feeding site for thousands of shore birds.

To preserve the island, The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service posted signs forbidding boaters from walking ashore and visitors, most of whom were nudists, complied. Then in 2004, the Tampa Bay area received the aftershocks of the four hurricanes that hammered the Sunshine State, and Passage Key all but vanished.

All that's left is a giant sandbar about 100 yards long that disappears during high tide. Since birds no longer could nest on the island, human restrictions were lifted and the nudists could come ashore.

The AANR group did just that, wading through the warm waters to the remnants of Passage Key. They picked up sand dollars, tried to stay clear of sea urchins, and even buried one of the youth ambassadors, Kelly Bridger, in the sand. Dolphins were seen about 20 yards from where the boat was anchored.

Back on the boat, the youth ambassadors discovered the joy of jumping from a perch above the deck into the water 10 feet below. Rusty and Vanessa just shook their heads.

"It seems whenever we take a younger crowd out, they manage to find that same spot to jump off of," Rusty said.

Throughout the trip, the guests took a break from the sun and rested in the spa-

rious air-conditioned cabin, where Vanessa had prepared a buffalo chicken dip and a three-layer Italian dip.

The Grin & Bare It has three levels: a lower cabin level with a bathroom and two small bedrooms. There's the main cabin and also an upper, open canopied level from where the boat is controlled. (The boat also can be operated from the cabin during bad weather.)

All afternoon, Rusty and Vanessa play music CDs that provide ambiance and, in the case of the AANR youth group, a soundtrack for dancing on deck. Other than the sound of birds and the occasional passing day, it was virtually quiet.

"This is amazing," said Vizzari, munching on Vanessa's delicacies during a mid-afternoon break from the sun. "I can see how this would be very popular among nudists."

By late afternoon, the tide began to swallow Passage Key and Rusty spotted dark clouds in the distance. It was time to return to land, with memories of a nudist desert island experience to cherish. ☺