

[THE GUY PAGE]

THE SHAY CHRONICLES

Goodbye, Chicago; hello, whatever

Ever dream of opening a little restaurant, a rural bed and breakfast or making an easy million on eBay in your pajamas? Well, my dream of moving onto a boat in a faraway harbor has just come true. I listed my Oak Park condo and said goodbye to my family, pals, on-again, off-again girlfriend, and my equally turbulent freelance photography career.

The dependability of my photo bookings became increasingly iffy due in part to idiot-proof, high-quality, affordable digital Nikons, Canon and Fujis.

My cozy floating home, the Otter, is named for the whimsical sea creature that locals regard as a "slimy rat that swims." It is 14 tons of soul, with four dangling tire bumpers, two porthole windows and a faux smokestack. My underdog boat is docked among a dozen grander, more modern craft. I bought the 33-foot tugboat in La Conner, Wash., my new hometown, for the price of a Corolla. It's oak and maple, built in Sidney, British Columbia, in 1941, to transport lumberjacks with its economical but slightly stinky 50-horsepower diesel engine. The 7-foot-wide-by-20-something-foot cabin has a galley and head (toilet) and resembles an RV.

I discovered the Otter on the pretentiously

named yachtworld.com, an international marketplace Web site showcasing new and used boats ranging from modest fishing boats to \$50 million luxury liners. It was love at first sight.

La Conner is a quiet, tidy town, about an hour and a half drive north of Seattle, by the San Juan Islands, nautical playground to Bill Gates, Gene Hackman and now me.

Alice, my 100-pound golden retriever, and I are getting acquainted with the boat's slight bobbing and our six wobbly sea legs. She sleeps with me and keeps my body and heart, warm. I look out my porthole window. No yard work. No shoveling. Just a quiet channel lined with rows of vacant boats patiently awaiting a visit from their captains and kids. It's like Door County on steroids, as the snow-capped, 10,800-foot Mt. Baker defines my northeast horizon, when not cloudy.

Fantasy yields to reality as I know little of currents and local sandbar hazards and must change my oil. Unlike a car, there is no hood, and I search for the cap. I need to keep my dream afloat.

—Steve Shay

Editor's note: We'll check in with Steve on occasion, just to see if a dream really can come true.



Steve Shay and trusty dog Alice take their worldly belongings to sea—well, to the boat Steve bought in the hope of starting a new life. Stay tuned.