

Doing the Ditch

Getting through the trouble spots requires caution and careful planning.

Story and photography by George Sass Sr.

Sitting in the salon having my morning coffee, I heard a knock from outside and saw the owner of a nearby trawler standing on the dock, charts in hand, eager to talk with me. He'd heard I was headed south and was wondering what I knew about Georgia's Hell Gate, an increasingly tricky spot to get through on the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW).

Other ICW travelers soon joined us as the sun rose on Georgia's Isle of Hope Marina. Double-checking tide tables and sharing local knowledge had become a necessity during this trip, especially in Georgia, where the Feds' dredging hasn't kept up with the constant shoaling.

I hadn't traveled "The Ditch" since 2003 and was eager to know if the rumors about severe shoaling were true. My boat for this 1,200-mile trip from Annapolis, Maryland, to Stuart, Florida, was ideal. The twin-engine Corvette 340 cruises at 18 knots and draws only 3 feet 3 inches, and her props and shafts are protected by a keel.

The builder of this new model, who also builds Fleming Yachts, asked me to deliver it for Florida's winter boat shows and to provide feedback about its performance and design details before they ramped up production. I can't think of a more thorough sea trial than a two-week journey down the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway.

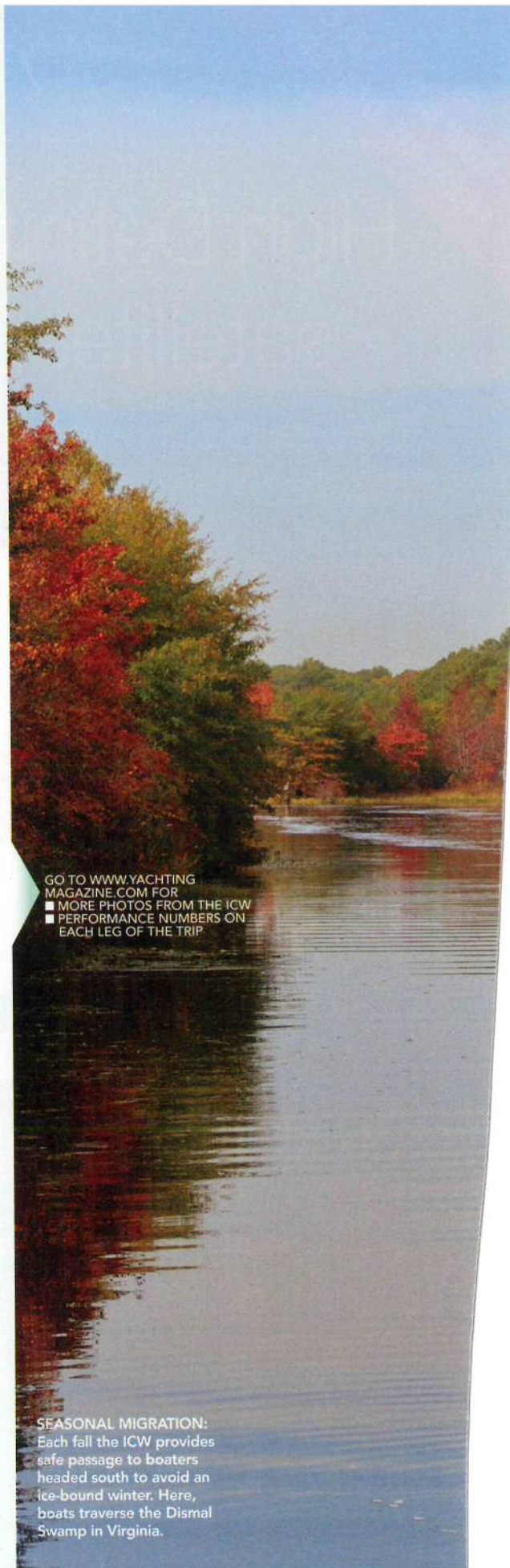
PART ONE: ANNAPOLIS TO BEAUFORT, SOUTH CAROLINA

The trip began in early November with a 150-mile, nonstop run down the Chesapeake Bay from Annapolis to Portsmouth, Virginia. Joining me for the first leg was my boating buddy from Canada, Pat Horvat, who was eager to leave Alberta's minus 20 degree weather behind him. Cruising at 18 knots we arrived at the Tidewater Marina in Portsmouth in 8½ hours. At this speed the Corvette's Cummins 330s burn 23 gallons per hour.

A boardwalk with planned green space lines the restored Portsmouth waterfront, which is across the Elizabeth River from Norfolk's popular Nauticus museum and the USS *Wisconsin* battleship. During rush hour a paddle-wheel ferry delivers commuters to Norfolk's bustling business section.

Since I'd run the Virginia Cut before, we decided to try the alternative route, the Dismal Swamp, which cuts through a wildlife refuge on its way to Elizabeth City, North Carolina. It was a weekday morning, so we had to plan for the restricted opening of the nearby Gilmerton Bridge as well as Deep Creek Lock, the first of two easy-to-transit locks along the route. Although we were only 55 miles from Elizabeth City, the speed limit between locks meant we would be pushing it to get there before dark.

The scenery was spectacular, but we kept our eyes ahead of us, since half-



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EACH LEG OF THE TRIP

SEASONAL MIGRATION:
Each fall the ICW provides
safe passage to boaters
headed south to avoid an
ice-bound winter. Here,
boats traverse the Dismal
Swamp in Virginia.

submerged tree branches and logs threatened our props. Using extreme caution and running at 6 knots didn't prevent the repeated bumps and bangs from rattling our nerves. No wonder sailboats and displacement trawlers with protected running gear tend to favor this route.

We found Mariner's Wharf, a row of complimentary transient slips in downtown Elizabeth City, as the last light dipped below the cityscape. Dubbed the "Harbor of Hospitality," Elizabeth City encourages boaters to stop here, and its revitalized waterfront, shops, restaurants and Museum of the Albemarle are good reasons to do so.

Our next stop was Belhaven, North Carolina, 85 miles south. A nasty chop on the Albemarle Sound showed the Corvette's rough water pedigree, and our cruising speed remained a comfortable 18 knots except for no-wake zones. After getting a slip at the accommodating Belhaven Waterway Marina, a walk through town revealed a struggling local economy.

We found a more vibrant atmosphere 50 miles south at Oriental. Known as "The Sailing Capital of the Carolinas," Oriental is a small, quiet town located on the Neuse River off Pamlico Sound, a large estuary second in size to the Chesapeake Bay. Cruising, sailing and fishing are an integral part of the area's culture, and the town enthusiastically welcomes transients.

Our slip at the Oriental Marina and Inn was convenient to its Tiki Bar and Restaurant, where we enjoyed happy hour and an excellent meal. A public dinghy dock encourages anchoring in the small harbor or up Greens Creek, just beyond the 45-foot-high bridge. Besides boating activities, Oriental seems to inspire healthy doses of walking and talking. My morning stroll along the river's Lou Mac Park was followed by breakfast at The Bean, where locals gather to discuss sports and politics, all with a dash of good ol' boy, Southern humor.

Weather permitting, running outside can save hours, so after arriving in Beaufort, North Carolina, the next day we made the offshore jump to Wrightsville Beach, also in North Carolina. Both inlets are wide and well marked, and the Corvette ran them effortlessly. After getting fuel

THE CORVETTE 340

A little yacht with big ambitions

The all-new Corvette 340 is an updated version of Europe's popular Corvette 320, and it is now built at the same yard in Taiwan where Fleming motoryachts are built. Marketed as "The World's Biggest Little Yacht," it offers two private staterooms, each with a head and shower. The aft stateroom is impressive, because it utilizes the full width of the hull and features a walk-around island berth, a large hanging locker, built-in dressers and a desk/vanity. Outside, there are two spacious living areas, the aft sun deck and the flying bridge, which seats seven.

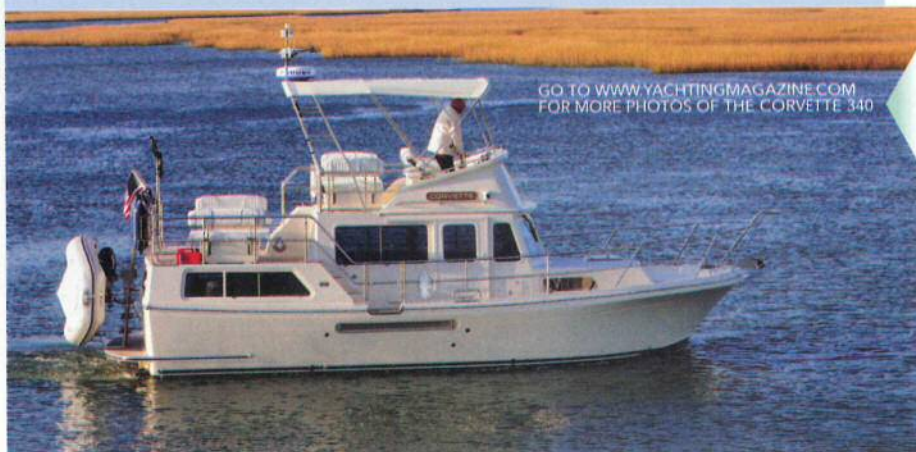
Beyond its generous living space, the Corvette 340 delivers superb performance and quality. Even with the standard Yanmar 315 horsepower engines, she will cruise at 18 knots and top out at more than 20 knots. The factory is working on other power packages in addition to the optional Cummins, which are a bit large for this engine room. A lot of attention has been paid to noise attenuation, and running this boat for eight or nine hours a day is not at all tiring because it is so quiet, especially when at the upper helm. With its twin screws, the 340 is extremely easy to maneuver, even without the use of its bow thruster.

In ocean swells, running an inlet or heading directly into a nasty chop, the Corvette's proven hull design works well and provides a sense of confidence even in snotty conditions. It doesn't pound or slam into head seas, and in following seas it tracks well and is very much in control (a bit surprising considering its rather square, boxy rear end).

If you have ever been on a Fleming, you will recognize the quality of the Corvette's systems engineering as well as its interior woodwork. It is apparent these craftsmen don't know how to build anything other than a first-class yacht, even if it's only 34 feet in length. The flawless gelcoat, teak decks (vacuum-bagged to the fiberglass decks, eliminating the need for fasteners) and heavy-duty stainless rails and hardware are just a few signs that this is a well-built yacht that should hold its value for many years to come.

A few things on this new model need to be tweaked, however, and the factory has already responded with new drawings. The second helm chair crowds the salon and is in the way of the electrical panel, so both helm chairs are being replaced by a convertible bench seat that will also extend the settee. Access to the engine room will also be improved with different size hatches and an easily removable salon table. Otherwise, I found this updated version of its popular predecessor to be a well-designed, solidly built yacht.

With a base price of \$450,000, the Corvette 340 is not an inexpensive 34-foot boat, but upon close inspection, you get what you pay for. It's ideal for those who want to downsize from a larger yacht without sacrificing quality or luxury, and it would be a significant upgrade for those graduating from a smaller boat and/or lesser brand. For more information and dealer listings, visit www.corvettemarine.com.



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