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Boating may offer an escape from many realities -- but not the reality of gas prices

By Alice Haymond
Post staff reporter

For the last 10 years, when the weather turned warm and the days grew long, Dave Stamford has headed for the Ohio River.

Boating is a lifestyle, says the Anderson Township resident, who moors his 39-foot Sea Ray at Four Seasons Marina in Cincinnati's Columbia-Tusculum neighborhood. It will take more than escalating fuel costs to change that.

"We're pleasure boaters," he said. "The way we look at it, this is our second home."

With hot weather and the traditional start of summer, boating becomes a popular pastime in Greater Cincinnati. This year, though, the season has also brought record-high gas prices. And gasoline is a major expense for boaters, whose vessels can get as little as one mile to the gallon and who have to pay even more for it on the river than they do at the corner gas station.

Many boaters and marina owners, however, say the spiraling price of gasoline - it was selling for more than \$4 a gallon at Four Seasons last weekend - is not going to keep them off the water, although it may change their boating habits.

Looking for cost savings most are recreational boaters, who generally favor smaller water craft but like to travel more in them.

"You look at the cost of gas and getting the boat there and operating it, the gas prices have a significant impact," said Dennis Stanton, who has taken trips with his brothers up to the Great Lakes over the last 30 years. This year, the Blue Ash resident downgraded to a smaller boat for better gas mileage on the water and on the road.

His former boat, a 1994, 28-foot Bayliner 2858, got one mile per gallon. The boat he and his brother James bought about two weeks ago, a 24-foot Bayliner 245, is rated to get up to three miles a gallon. Stanton said he also expects it to cost less to tow because it weighs less and doesn't require so heavy a trailer.

Stanton said a typical summer cruise for him and his brother and his brother was between Rivertowne Marina in Columbia-Tusculum to Ludlow and Bromley. In September, they tow their boat to Port Clinton and Put-In-Bay, Ohio, on Lake Erie, and stay until October.

That continues a tradition he started with James and another brother, Tom, and their grandfather. "We've been going out to Put-In-Bay for years, since I was 16," Stanton said.

When Tom, who was called "Dudley," died of a cancer a few years ago and gas prices started to approach \$3 a gallon, Stanton thought about giving up boating altogether.

James convinced him to try a smaller boat - which they named "Dudley" - and that enabled them to

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continue their trips without having to scale back too much.

To conserve gas, boaters are staying put more once they get out on the water.

Owners of smaller craft who haul them from home are filling up on land, where the price is 60 to 70 cents a gallon cheaper, rather than at marinas. According to cincygasprices.com, plus-grade gas at stations in Cincinnati ranges from \$3.30 to \$3.50.

Owners of larger craft that have to stay on the water during the season find marina gas even pricier than what they can buy on shore.

"Once you're on the river, you don't have a lot of options," said Willie Wolff, who works at the Ship Store at Watertown Yacht Club in Dayton, Ky.

The Ship Store was charging \$3.99 a gallon earlier this weekend, and owner Randy Deitz said he still had lots of business. Most boaters don't ask the price, Deitz said, they just tell him to put in a dollar amount of gas. Recent sales ranged from \$5.51 to \$9.00.

Watertown office manager Crystal Trent predicted gas prices at the marina would probably go up more, "but I still think they'll pay, no matter what the price is," she said.

Like many auto owners, boat owners did not anticipate that gas prices would rise so sharply.

"A lot of boaters messed up this summer," Deitz said. "We started at \$3.59 and they said, 'We'll just wait.' " Then prices went up further instead of down.

Marina owners had concerns that the cost of fuel would hurt their businesses, but, though people are being more conservative with gas, business is booming.

"I think people might be taking shorter trips," said Dave Bricking, the owner of Riverside Marina in Dayton. "Business is good because people are staying in the area."

A lot of people with bigger boats have bought smaller pontoons to ride around in, Bricking said. He has also seen people carry gas down in five-gallon cans to fill up their boats.

"It's not very safe, but if that's what they want to do, well, nobody wants to pay 50 to 60 cents a gallon more if they can get it cheaper," he said.

Dale Appel, commander of the Boone County Water Rescue Unit, said he thought boat traffic was lower over the Memorial Day holiday, typically the first big weekend of the boating season.

"There were more people anchored down than normal," he said. "They enjoyed the area without cruising."

Fuel costs are changing the way Appel's organization, which patrols the Ohio River in Boone and Kenton counties, carries out its mission, he said. The unit's boats are cruising at slower speeds to conserve fuel.

That means they get back to their home base at Villa Hills Marina later, but they'll probably do that all summer, he said.

"That (increase in price) is going to be a concern," Appel said. "You have to look at what you can do to conserve gas."

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