

HOME

GINA
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GONE WITH THE WIND

This couple has gone overboard, but Southern Belle is certainly a grand lady of the seas.

Perched on Gail and George Grant's sun-drenched deck is sleepy seven-year-old Australian koolie Molly and, notably, the Nancy Knudsen paperback *Shooting Stars and Flying Fish*, recounting her and husband Ted's round-the-world yachting adventure. It is perhaps a hint to what awaits George and Gail in their retirement.

The Grants are just settling in to their new "home", and to describe it as having uninterrupted water views somewhat undersells it. Rather, their new home is the view, a 42-foot cruising yacht named Southern Belle moored at Marmong Point for now.

Gail, who runs a foundation that supports intellectual property awareness for the movie and TV industry, and self-employed builder George have long dreamt of owning the ultimate yacht.

When they were first married they had a

14-foot Zodiac inflatable, sans creature comforts, to facilitate their scuba diving escapades, an interest that took them to diving locations in Australia as well as Hawaii, Vanuatu and Fiji. After paying off their first house they bought a small Hood 23 and learnt to sail. George is now a qualified coastal yachtmaster. Gail, who even now regards herself more of a "champagne sailor", says she was not keen at first but gradually developed a love of boating.

From the Hood 23 they upsized to a Compass 28, then to a Cavalier 32 and eventually a Cavalier 37. But they knew they eventually wanted yachting to be more than just a weekend dalliance. They travelled to New Zealand, to Queensland on several occasions and searched all over Sydney for the ultimate boat that would become their home. They realised in the end they would have to build.

Gail, who jokes that BOAT stands for Bring Out Another Thousand, admits that it was a big decision – yachts of this calibre start from \$650,000 – but they went over their finances with a fine-tooth comb and decided to take the leap. Having admired the craftsmanship of Cardiff business Bluewater Cruising Yachts at the Sydney Boat Show, the Grants invited them on board.

The couple wanted a safe and comfortable "go anywhere" yacht, one that could be sailed by just the two of them, but still be big enough to enjoy the company of friends.

"A lot of people buy cruising boats and they buy them too big, so big that you would need a crew. It can get over-complicated. You've got to find a balance," George says.

When David Bradburn and his crew started building the Bluewater 420, there were the finer points to consider. The Grants had a list of

must-haves: auto pilot; a heater (their diesel Webasto will be a must for a future voyage to Scotland via Alaska); a drawer fridge "so you don't have to stand on your head" to fessick for things; and an AIS (automatic identification system) which locates and IDs other boats in the vicinity.

George was adamant they needed a washing machine on board so David searched the world, literally, for one that would fit the criteria. He found one made in Switzerland, a small front-loading Eudora Soba with stainless steel bowl and galvanised body specially made for the recreational market.

"We were very indulgent," Gail says. "Really over the top. We have two TVs, two bedrooms and two bathrooms. If something's worth doing, it's worth overdoing. We love it."

George handpicked every sheet of timber veneer. The Queensland myrtle – not a traditional boat timber – makes quite a statement. It is used in the interior cabinetry and is a stunning contrast to the teak floor with birch inlay.

Cream leatherette adds another touch of class and softens the ceiling panels, which can all be removed to work on the boat's wiring and deck fittings.

The dining table, with important wine storage at its base and which folds to a third of its size, is a feature the Grants are relishing.

"In our other boats I hated being trapped by the table," Gail says. The folding table opens up the saloon to create a living room area, convenient to reach lockers and conducive to relaxation helped by macro suede plush lounges.

"With every boat we've owned we've noted what irritated us," Gail says.

"One boat we had we had to take the bed apart to go to the toilet.

"This boat is a culmination of dreams and irritations.

"I didn't want to compromise this time."

The laundry and second toilet can become a workshop at sea, with a work bench folding out over the bowl (in lieu of the dining table) and compartments to store tools.

"I've never had so much storage," Gail says, gushing over the "enormous closets" and more than 50 cupboards throughout.



INDULGENT: Gail and George Grant and dog Molly, and their "go anywhere" home.

PICTURES: DEAN OSLAND



The cockpit is an outdoor-indoor space. A barbecue swings out over the water. The kitchen boasts a Force 10 gas stove-oven, filtered tank water, and a generous fridge and freezer under the Corian benchtop.

A stepped mast and kevlar hull are among the practical features that will no doubt be a godsend on long-distance trips and in less than ideal conditions.

The boat represents the couple's retirement plan but a decision to live on it full-time will mean having to find a good home for Molly,

who has been happy to go along for the ride since she was eight weeks old.

"She's really at home on this boat," Gail says. "This is the life she knows."

George, a man of few words, is happy to articulate the appeal of a boating life.

"It's the freedom, really, and the idea of not getting another electricity bill in my life," he says. "If you tire of the view, you can always move on."

The couple, who have a Pittwater mooring lined up, will sail to Tasmania for Christmas and have long-term plans to sail across to New Zealand to visit friends, then on to Tonga, across the Pacific to Japan, the Aleutian Islands, and on to the west coast of the United States.

Southern Belle, which took 18 months to complete, is so named because Atlanta Georgia native Gail "wanted the name to have something to do with the south, something grand and ladylike".

"Basically, I wanted her to be a lady and George said: fine."

Gail also had visions of a green boat, as a nod to Scarlett O'Hara's dress in *Gone With The Wind*, but superstition scotched those plans.

Instead, the yacht has an ivory-coloured hull and maroon trim inspired by an American Island Packet yacht, and the couple couldn't be happier with the result.

"She's truly a belle of the sea," Gail says.

The yacht's maiden voyage was to Darling Harbour for the 2011 Sydney Boat Show. For Gail, who

had only seen the boat at Marmong Point when toil and sawdust veiled its beauty, laying eyes on the Southern Belle at the show proved overwhelming.

"I felt like crying. I did cry. I thought 'Is this ours? Can it be this good?' It was amazing."

George's love of the sea stems from growing up in Inverness and spending summers in the Isle of Skye. Gail grew up in land-locked Atlanta. Her love of the sea stems from her love of George.

The couple have lived a life less ordinary, and their new home suggests more adventure ahead.