

# THE LEAP BACK TO TERRA FIRMA

BY DOUG MITCHELL

Four years ago, I didn't know this industry existed. I grew up landlocked in Alberta, Canada, with the nearest ocean being a 12-hour drive through the Rocky Mountains to coastal British Columbia. Sure, I had been around boats before, the kind that pulled us around on wakeboards on freshwater lakes, or the paddle-powered sort that lazily floated us down icy rivers on hot summer days. And having done a great deal of international traveling since graduating high school in 1998, a lot of which brought me to beautiful coastal locales, seeing yachts would have been inescapable.

But besides showing up in the background of a few poorly framed snapshots, I guess I never gave these massive, gleaming-white vessels much thought. Apart from a quick ponder of how much one of them might be worth or who was sitting inside, sipping champagne out of gold flutes while lighting the finest cigars with million-dollar bills, they never really grabbed my full attention. To me, they were just another episode of "Lifestyles of The Rich and Famous" and something that I would never be a part of.

Around 2007, that began to change. A good friend of mine from high school who was living in Vancouver told me she had been working in the industry and how she thought I would love it. Over the course of the next year and a half, while picking her brain about this mysterious "yachting" she spoke of, the idea of getting paid to live and work aboard a multimillion-dollar vessel that traveled the world began to sound appealing. The seed had been planted, and with nourishing thoughts of sunshine and coastline, it blossomed into a full-blown plan. Ties were cut, belongings were stored, a small bag was packed, and in September of 2008, I arrived in Ft. Lauderdale ready to become part of a crew.



After a sobering three-month plummet back down to Earth courtesy of the struggling economy and a very competitive newbie job market, I finally found my place on a yacht in January 2009 and have been with it ever since. Becoming a man of the sea was a swift and smooth transition. Any sacrifices in the way of small cabin quarters or limited personal space were dwarfed by the excitement of being employed to live and travel on board an amazingly beautiful craft. It simultaneously felt surreal and natural, and leaving my land-based life behind was painless.

However, after two years, I find myself wondering what the reverse shift would be like. Not that I plan to bid farewell to yachting any time soon, but certain changes that have transpired in my life over the last six months have caused me to bridge the gap between the two worlds in some ways. Since coming back to Florida after our Med season, I've moved into a place with my non-yachtie girlfriend, bought a vehicle, and even joined a gym that offers more than a couple of dumbbells and a yoga mat on the fly bridge. Since we're currently in a yard period, we more or less work a Monday to Friday week, and when the work day finishes, I get to go home and delight in the spaciousness of it before going to sleep in a full-size bed.

I'm very grateful to get the best of both worlds. But yachting is different for all crew, and how involved one gets or

for how long depends on a million variables. For some, yachting is a career, and hopefully one that will successfully and enjoyably float them all the way to retirement. For others, it is a temporary swap from the monotonous routine life holds on land; maybe a chance to save some money or see some of the world before planting some roots. Whatever forces led us to the docks, we're all in it for different reasons and may very well find ourselves one day deciding to leave yachting in the wake. I spoke to a few people who have taken that leap to find out how soft the landing was.

A South African friend of mine that I met a couple years ago left yachting to go back to land but soon found himself working back on a cruise ship in the entertainment department. It was a decision fostered by the realities of rent, bills and all the other land based expenses. "Earning that amount of money while yachting and spending like wildfire while docked and not saving as much as I could was a big issue for me when I got back to land," he said.

Others like deckhand Sam of *M/Y Gran Finale*, have recently returned to yachting after playing the land game for a while. When the full-time positions were hard to come by two years ago and desperate crew were making a lot more sacrifices to lock up those positions, Sam

decided it maybe wasn't for him. However, after working away from the industry for some time, he realized that some of those sacrifices are a small price to pay and knew he wanted to get back into it. "This industry would allow me to do at work what I'd previously worked to do on my vacation time," he said.

Certainly, there are others who have made the transition back to land for good without regrets. I know of some who have kept ties to the industry by working with yachting publications or brokerage firms, and even some of the trade or tech guys in the shipyards tell me how they once threw the lines like I do now. So, while it may not be an easy decision to make, shifting priorities in life sometimes bring it to the surface to be dealt with. I've never been one to plan my life too far in advance, so for now I still have a great future in yachting. There's still a lot to learn, a ladder to climb and experience to soak up. But one day, I may find myself making that big leap back to terra firma, and hopefully, I'll be ready for it. ☺

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