

EXPLORER

Water Taxis

The most enjoyable way to get from here to there



PHOTOS BY GRETCHEN F. COYLE

Need a ride to an island escape? Or maybe you want to explore the area's waters? Hop aboard Cheryl Mays's Island Charters (clockwise from left), Emily LoCicero's Island Girl Charters, or the Morton family's cruise boats at Jug Creek Marina.

No yellow cabs or airport limos are in sight, and instead of pavement there is clear blue water underneath, dolphins jumping alongside the boat, and a brilliant sky as licensed captains shuttle people from local marinas to outlying islands. These ferries and water taxis haul people back and forth no matter

By Gretchen F. Coyle

what the day, time, or weather.

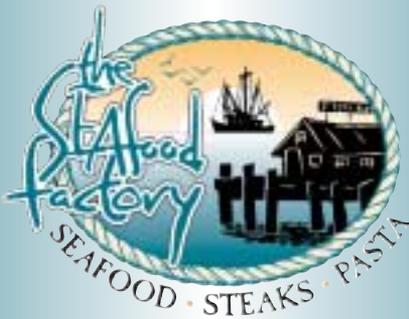
"I work about a hundred hours a week during the busy season, sometimes daily from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m.," says Cheryl Mays, owner of Island Charters at Pineland Marina on Pine Island. Island Charters has a regular water taxi schedule with one of two boats running every two hours to Cabbage Key and North Captiva and special late-night runs on weekends. North

Captiva residents also can contract with Island Charters for mail delivery. Mays employs two full-time and two part-time captains to pilot the *New Moon* and the *Amber Moon*. Reservations must be made in advance.

"I've asked myself how I got into this business," Mays says with a laugh, punching a regular trip ticket for a longtime North Captiva resident and hurrying a

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At night, when few others want to navigate area waters, Steve Harman's Water Bug Charters will get you safely where you want to go.

tardy captain along. But she has been around for twelve years and has just signed another ten-year lease at Pineland.

From a background in carnival games concessions, Mays turned the Pineland Marina shop into Island Bound Trading Post, which sells staples. "We like to provide a service for our customers," she says. "They can shop and load up on some groceries while waiting for the boat."

While barges take building materials and furniture to the islands, ferries are usually for people only. But there are exceptions, as Mays knows. One time she took Flash, a potbellied pig, from his North Captiva home to the veterinarian. Another time Island Charters delivered a Shoney's Big Boy statue to a resident's front yard. The proud owner had bought this dubious artwork from a Shoney's that was going out of business.

"I have transported everything from newborns to the deceased," Steve Harman of Water Bug Charters states. "Just the other day I took proud parents with their two-day-old baby out to Useppa." Family cats and dogs are a given, along with the usual accompaniment of food, strollers, and luggage—sometimes at odd hours, when finding a ride across the water can be tough. "I recognized the need for this type of business," he explains. "People are taking advantage of lower airfares advertised on the Internet, so they arrive after regular business hours."

Harman takes people to dinner at restaurants such as the Pink Elephant in Boca

Grande or the restaurant at Cabbage Key. Occasionally he also has to deal with folks who have had too much to drink and insist on going back to their cars on the mainland.

Water Bug Charters was christened by Harman's niece, a result of Harman's past involvement in selling, restoring, and racing Volkswagens. Now, he races his water taxi to pick up and drop off fares, no matter what the day, time, or weather.

The rides can range from "complete bliss" on a lovely, calm day to "conditions mixed with terror" during a storm or windy northeaster, Harman says. His specialty is piloting late at night or early in the morning. "It is a challenge at night. I try to keep a cool head for my passengers. I want to give my customers a sense of security and make it as pleasant as possible for them." Like other water taxis, his boat is equipped with the necessary electronics to assure safe rides through rain or fog.

At twenty-six years old, Emily LoCicero is a Kent, Ohio, transplant living in Pineland. "My dad had a house on North Captiva, so I was taking my parents back and forth. Then I was issued a challenge: 'Get your captain's license.'" Today, LoCicero has four boats ranging from a twenty-four-foot catamaran to a thirty-one-foot Morgan based at Four Winds Marina in Bokeelia. All have the appropriate name *Island Girl*.

Island Girl Charters works with the North Captiva Realty Club taking guests back and forth. Emily owns and leases commercial docks on North Captiva in

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addition to tying up at McCarthy's Marina on Captiva.

Island Girl Charters advertises cruises aboard the smooth-riding, twenty-six-foot Leisure Cat. Half- and full-days trips are available for shelling, sightseeing, snorkeling, dolphin watching, or parasailing. "Vacations are supposed to be fun and we make our trips fun," LoCicero says.

All water taxi owners have stories. LoCicero has worked beach weddings on Cayo Costa, tried to deliver 150 people, almost at once, to an out island for a party, and made a special run with nothing aboard but a bunch of balloons for a special birthday.

Virginia and Joe Morton and son Tommy McLaughlin come from a family that has a long history on the water. Virginia's great-grandfather Toribio José Padilla and his family came from the Canary Islands by way of Cuba, settling on Cayo Costa in 1857. Thus started a line of proud commercial fishermen.

For sixteen years, the Mortons have owned Jug Creek Marina, where their two cruise boats are based. They do some taxiing and specialize in wildlife trips with shelling, swimming, and nature trips.

Day trips aboard the 37-passenger *Toribio José* pontoon boat to explore Cayo Costa is the Mortons' niche. Passengers regularly see manatees and dolphins, as well as bald eagles and ospreys. "People are able to interact with all types of wildlife," Virginia Morton says.

An estimated twenty-five water-taxi services operate between Boca Grande and Sanibel/Captiva. As local out islands become more developed and more visitors want to see wildlife, skimming across the water in a charter boat filled with happy passengers has become a way of life in Southwest Florida. 🐬

Freelance writer Gretchen Coyle lives on Useppa Island and in Beach Haven, New Jersey.

Island Charters:

239/283-1113 (office)
800/340-3321 (toll-free)

Water Bug Charters:

239/283-7335, 239/469-5697 (pager)

Island Girl Charters: 239/633-8142

Jug Creek Cruise Boat:

239/283-9512