

Sag Harbor ^{The} Express.

A Slice of Life Trails the Waters Inside Don Heckman's American Beauty II By Mahreen Khan

Don Heckman steers his boat to the tune of Glen Miller, John Barry's 1985 "Out of Africa" soundtrack and the reverberating hum of American Beauty II's motor drifting across the expansive blue-green sea.

The captain of roughly 25 years bought his current powerboat, American Beauty II in 2003, after retiring the original Beauty of its eight years of use. While recuperating from a neurosurgery back in '89, Heckman realized he wouldn't be able to return to his previous profession of commercial fishing for some time, so he thought up American Beauty Cruises and cast his net.

"I found the first American Beauty in Huntington and that was basically it," Heckman said. "I was consumed."

Indeed, he was. Not only has he been driving Sag Harbor residents and tourists across the bay for a near three decades – he is the sole man behind the 90-minute nature excursions, which occur three times a day, seven days a week. He also operates his boat for private charters which are held at riders' discretion, seven days a week – and for five-day-a-week, two-hour sunset cruises. The cruises afford riders a view of attractions, including Barcelona Point and the Cedar Island Lighthouse in East Hampton, Shelter Island's Mashomack Preserve and full osprey nests along the way. Heckman sites the preserve as his favorite landmark, mentioning that he has seen bald eagles there.

His last sick day? He laughed at the thought, saying it was hard to remember.

"In the fall when it's time for me to switch occupations, I'll take a couple weeks off. But basically, it's a grind from April through October, or the end of September at least."

Heckman's first mates, Frank Ferrante and Declan Alder have come through for him more than once, he said, but that doesn't take away from the fact that he is short-staffed.

“I love the pace of it. The boat, it goes very slow, it’s very meditative,” Ferrante said. “What I see on the shore, it’s beautiful – the trees and the shrubbery, the homes and the quietness of it. You see lots of animals, birds and fox and deer. There’s these very large boats also, these very big yachts. And those get rented out sometimes, but this is more like being in someone’s house. There, you don’t really see the water. Here, you’re very close to it.”

Sag Harbor is rich with history as a whaling port – the only village with its own port as part of its main shopping area, in fact – and that is something Heckman attempts to illustrate with his cruises. When music isn’t softly playing, a roughly 45-minute narrative is. The narrative – which was pre-recorded by a now-deceased personality from WLNG, Sag Harbor’s licensed radio station – covers the community’s history, including local attractions, fires, battles and its many miles of preserved land. The town was settled in the early 1700s.

“I’m doing the best I can, you know?” Heckman said. “The most rewarding thing is that a lot of the people that come for a ride have never done anything like this before and they really appreciate it. That’s what I believed in the very beginning. Now, I take it for granted, but people that come on don’t take it for granted. This is a new experience for them and they like it, and I think that’s what I was trying to do all along. It gets tiring, you know, the season is short, but you have to make the best of every day.”