

# Charter boat is captain's true luff

By VICKI FISHER  
Business Editor  
May 9, 2005

PHOTO BY VICKI FISHER

Capt. Iris Clarke has been sailing charter trips in St. Michaels on her family's 1926 New England Catboat, Selina II, for four years.

**ST. MICHAELS** — Iris Clarke jokes that she wanted to be an heiress when she grew up.

The former international software company executive didn't realize that her "dream" would someday come true when she inherited her father's 40-foot New England Catboat, the Selina II. Clarke's career evolved into a full-time job owning, operating and maintaining Selina II. The boat was built in 1926 and had been Clarke's family pleasure boat until she began chartering it four years ago. It is now the largest of the surviving vintage Catboats.



After Selina met its demise, Selina II was built as a knock-off boat. When Clarke's grandfather, Samuel Hird, had the boat built, he said he wanted a Crosby Catboat — but bigger. The boat was passed down from Hird to Clarke's father, Bridg Hunt, and now to Clarke, who has had the boat for four years. Selina II was rebuilt to be used as a charter boat with the help of Tom Howell at the Richardson Boat Yard in Cambridge. It took a year to restore the boat that Clarke grew up with along the east end of Long Island, N.Y.

"When someone first called me an old gaffer, I thought, 'Hey! I'm not that old!,'" says Clarke, who was the lone female in a class of 20 males when she took courses to help earn her captain's license from the U.S. Coast Guard.

Hird sailed the boat for 34 years before Hunt, who sailed Selina II for 41 years. Clarke says with a laugh that she's not sure about continuing that progression, but she will sail the family's boat for at least 25 years.

"Then I don't know what happens because I didn't have kids," she says.

Clarke admits that she didn't know what to expect in taking care of the boat or how to fund such an endeavor.

"It's a time commitment," she says. "They (boats) truly epitomize the expression 'a stitch in time saves nine.'" If even the smallest bit of wood becomes exposed to the elements underneath the varnish, it could get wet and peel off, Clarke says, so she has to constantly check the boat for even the tiniest problems.

Working on Selina II might seem like smooth sailing, but Clarke estimates that she puts in up to 60 hours of work a week on the boat, some days working from 8 a.m. to prepare the boat and finishing up at 10 or 11 p.m. There are four two-hour tours on Selina II every day, seven days a week, with Clarke and one crew member aboard for each trip. In between tours, Clarke continuously maintains the boat and the cold winter months are spent doing maintenance as well. Already the ship is booked heavily throughout the summer; last year more than 800 people boarded Selina II.

The old wooden vessel has many of its remaining parts, including its warning bell inside the cabin, the bell out on the deck and the rich wood wainscoting, some of which has been painted over during the years. Clarke even has the original wooden toilet seat cover and all of its original hinges. Some of its most interesting features are the things visitors might take for granted, like the ship's bell and gauges. The bell's rope was done by a master knotsman. It has five knots for good luck and inside the rope is a tiny piece of paper with a Psalm inscribed on it. Clarke says the tradition of putting a copy of the Psalm ensures that if the ship goes down, the men on board will always be covered by those words from the Bible. The antique gauges near the bell could have been taken from an early Ford vehicle, like a Model T. The captain's chairs on the deck are only the second set of chairs that have been on the boat since it was built and are dated to the 1950s.

The diesel engine that runs Selina II is the same engine that powers the double-decker buses in London. Boats like this used to be used for carrying freight, ferrying passengers or for fishing. Unlike speedier boats, Selina II's top speed is 7½ knots, which is nearly 10 mph.

"It's like going out with grandma instead of with a 19-year-old Olympic champion," Clarke says.

Selina II is one of three tour sailboats that sail out of St. Michaels during the spring and summer. Unlike the excitement and action on speedier Catamarans, Selina II's trips are more about ambiance, elegance and comfort. An assortment of fine wines, cheeses and hors d'oeuvres are served during trips and Clarke doesn't book more than six people on a trip at a time. She recently became ordained so that she can marry couples on the ship, which is fitting since Clarke was married to her artist husband, C.D. Clarke, on Selina II. The boat has two particularly romantic trips — the sunset sail and the moonlight sail — and offers overnight sails, honeymoon getaways and other sailing packages.

While it is now docked outside the St. Michaels Harbor Inn and Marina, Selina II has sailed beyond the waters of the Bay. It has sailed as far north as Boston and was invited to sail in a parade of tall ships during a bicentennial celebration in New York City.

Part-time mate Jeff Barron, like Clarke, gave up a fast-paced corporate job to work on the Selina II. Although he's retired, he works Mondays on Selina II and three days a week as a bridge tender on the Tilghman Island Bridge. He was previously director of operations for the New York bureau of CNN, but says his jobs now "are the least (he) can do."

When asked why people love to travel on Selina II, Barron says, "it gives them two hours of mellow that they might not have experienced. It's so nice and so mellow to be out on this water for two hours, especially to people who aren't accustomed to that."

For more information, call 410-726-9400 or visit [www.sailselina.com](http://www.sailselina.com)