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Favorite Weekend Cruise: Great Salt Lake

Imagine sailing 4,198 feet above sea level on a lake that’s saltier than the ocean and larger than the state of Rhode Island—a lake where sudden storms erupt from nearby mountains and conditions shift from glassy to gale-force in an instant.

LANCE FAIRBANKS • UPDATED: AUG 2, 2017 • ORIGINAL: JUN 18, 2013

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The Great Salt Lake offers unique sailing conditions for both racers and cruisers. Roughly 75 miles long and 28 miles wide, it is the largest saltwater lake in the Western Hemisphere. Because it’s shallow—16 feet deep on average—and “endorheic,” meaning it has no outlet besides evaporation, the size of the lake fluctuates greatly from year to year, depending on weather conditions. On average, it covers 1,700 square miles and includes a dozen stone-capped islands, but it has dropped as low as 960 square miles, exposing hazardous shoals and reefs.

The lake is the largest remnant of prehistoric Lake Bonneville, which once stretched across the western half of Utah into Nevada. After 10,000 years of evaporation, the water that remains is rich with minerals, salt and brine shrimp, a significant food source for migratory birds in North America.

To comprehend its vastness, imagine sailing 25 miles on a mountain lake without having to gybe. Alter your course slightly, and you can reach for another 15 miles until you arrive at the farthest navigable distance, 40 miles away from the Great Salt Lake Marina, home to the “Saltiest Sailors in the World.”

With 17 percent salinity—compared to around 3.5 percent salinity in the world’s oceans—the lake never freezes, so there’s sailing all year long. On any given weekend, you will find a couple of dozen boats racing or cruising to one of several destinations. Each May, the Great Salt Yacht Club also hosts the Reynolds Cup, which is notorious for rough conditions and attracts only the saltiest of dogs. It’s common to experience 40 knots of wind and eight-10-foot waves that break over the bow like a pallet of bricks.

By mid-summer the water becomes remarkably clear and warm, with temperatures in the 80s. The lake creates its own weather, and in the afternoon high pressure sets in and the breeze drops, giving everyone an excuse to raft up and go for a swim in the buoyant water. Sometimes, to avoid the heat, we start sailing at sunset and sail by moonlight through the night, when the breeze is at its best.

Cruisers visit anchorages such as White Rock Bay, Crystal Springs and the rolling sands of Eardley Spit, where mineral deposits form small round grains called “oolitic sand.” The latter is a popular place to beach for a day or shelter from a gale. Two islands reach over 6,500 feet high, one of which, Antelope Island, is covered in hiking trails. The hillsides are draped in lush green foliage during the spring and become arid deserts by mid-summer.

It’s always surprised me that the Great Salt Lake manages to remain such a secret. Over 1.2 million people live in the Salt Lake Metropolitan area, but there are fewer than 300 sailboats at our marina. Salt Lake City International Airport is less than 15 minutes away and far more tourists visit the lake than locals. Visiting sailors from Europe, Australia and the coastal United States are inevitably impressed by the challenging conditions.

Many times I’ve been out on my Ericson 23, *Chesapeake*, on a quiet, late afternoon. The warm air rises into the sky, and a gentle breeze picks up as cool mountain air descends to fill my sails. The surface of the water remains a glassy mirror reflecting the golden light of an evening sun. The boat cuts a straight course and a rhythmic wake, while wind devils dart across the water, dancing across the Great Salt Lake, Utah’s best-kept secret.

Lance Fairbanks has sailed over 3,000 miles on the Great Salt Lake. He is co-founder of the Rogue/Riders, an advocacy group for boater safety and Cruising Director for the Great Salt Lake Yacht Club