

Captain Cindy Graham:

Georgia girl with a 'Gypsea' heart

By DEBRA BUTLER
Columnist

It was early and cold on the December morning when I met up with Capt. Cindy Graham at Sea Hag Marina.

After stowing my snacks and bottled water, we climbed into her truck and drove off, towing the "Gypsea II" behind us.

The sun was just coming up as we reached Hagen's Cove, turning the sky into beautiful shades of orange and blue. Silhouettes of palm trees and ancient pines were proof we were standing in an unspoiled area of Florida.

I got out of the truck to watch Capt. Cindy work her magic just as two startled deer ran off into the brush.

She released the tie downs on the trailer, put her truck in reverse and then stopped abruptly, allowing the airboat to slide smoothly off the trailer and onto hard ground.

With experienced hands adorned with rings on almost every finger, Capt.

Cindy Graham steered her 2019 18-foot Poorboys Performance Airboat powered by a 550-horsepower Levitator motor through the skinny water and marsh grass like she was spreading butter on a biscuit.

While other people might be intimidated by its power, this lady captain glides her custom-built turbo-charged machine with ease.

"I have never been afraid of driving an airboat," said Graham.

I looked down in amazement at the pearl-colored sand visible just inches beneath the surface of the water we were skimming over. Shore birds gracing the shallows took flight ahead of our path.

"I had no earthly idea I wanted to be a charter captain," Graham said. She

and her husband of 27 years, Steve, camped and fished out of the Econfina River for 10 years before moving to Steinhatchee.

"Some of the guys in the campground decided they wanted to go to captain's school, so Steve went with them. When he became a charter captain, then I was left at the house," she added.

It was then that Cindy decided to get her own airboat. As her husband got more and more busy with charters, often there were times when a second airboat would have come in handy.

At the age of 60 and on a whim, Cindy signed up for an Adams Marine Seminar licensing class held at the Steinhatchee Community Center in February of 2020. She was one of three women in the class.

"It was a tough class. Lots of memorization," said Cindy.

After obtaining her captain's license, Cindy could help out with her husband's charter business, Georgia Boy Charters.

"More and more, we are partnering up," she said.

If a larger-than-normal

group wants to go fishing, Steve can take part of the group on his airboat, while Cindy handles the rest.

While charters by airboat are not a common option in the Steinhatchee area, airboats can put clients in places that other boats cannot go. Cindy prefers no more than two clients on the boat at a time, but will take up to three if they are experienced fishermen.

"Fishing on an airboat can get tight with too many people," Cindy explained.

Originally from Georgia, Steve is a former paramedic, while Cindy worked in the laboratory at South Georgia Medical Center for 14 years. Together they formed (and still maintain) a business in Valdosta known as Airport Clinic.

Their business offers workplace drug testing, OSHA training and company physicals, as well as a family and occupational medical practice.

With a reliable office manager in place at Airport Clinic, the Grahams are able to live full time in Steinhatchee, where they plan to eventually retire.

For now, Cindy travels

to Valdosta every two weeks to handle paperwork.

Cindy prefers to launch her boat from either Hagens Cove or Rocky Creek because she can just drop the airboat on the dirt and drive it into the water.

"Sometimes I'll put it in the river, but you don't make good friends at the boat ramp when you have an airboat and somebody's trying to load," she said laughing.

Not just anyone can run charters on an airboat. In addition to the U.S. Coast Guard's required testing for a captain's license, there is one more step to be taken if you are operating an airboat

went as a flock of white herons flew off in front of us. Out of the water and onto the dirt path we soared, before Cindy was soon driving her airboat back onto the trailer with ease.

From there Cindy typically heads to Sea Hag Marina, where her clients can have their photos taken and fish cleaned by Clarence.

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(Left) Debra Butler with (right) Capt. Cindy Graham on board Graham's airboat, the "Gypsea II."

After a beautiful day on the water and with a nice catch of spotted seatrout and black sea bass in the cooler, Cindy headed back toward Hagens Cove.

Knowing I loved the scenery of the shallows, she spoke to me through the microphone in our noise-dampening headphones, "We'll be going back through the grass on our way in."

I set my camera to video mode as we whirred onward with Cindy moving cautiously, yet undeterred, through the ankle-deep water.

Among the reeds we

for hire.

In 2018, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) approved legislation requiring all persons operating an airboat carrying one or more passengers for hire to complete a FWC-approved airboat operator course.

Numerous airboat accidents and two deaths were the catalysts for this requirement that took effect in July 2019.

Operating an airboat can be dangerous — especially if the operator is distracted, unfamiliar with their surroundings, or if visibility is poor. The FWC website provides a list of companies approved to teach this course.

Back at the Georgia Boy Charters office, Cindy explained that the "Gypsea II" is her second airboat.

"The one I had before was very pretty. It just wasn't big enough to charter on," she said.

Nodding toward her husband, she added, "Actually he had to fish off of it a couple times because his boat broke down, and he was like, 'You are trading boats.' He made me sell it. It was a great starter boat for me."

When asked what words of wisdom she might pass on to future captains, Cindy said, "My advice to people wanting to be a charter captain is to have a job first. Get a career. Don't rely on captaining for your only income. It doesn't provide insurance or other benefits."

This married pair of captains make a great team. When they aren't on charters together, Steve is often found inside their home office, repairing rods, re-spooling lines and fixing her gear.

"He's a big help," Cindy said.



Captains Cindy and Steve Graham recently conducted a two-boat charter with members of the Chattanooga Steinhatchee Fishing Club.

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