

# Outdoors

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## Houseboats might be just the thing for adventurous baby boomers who seek a condo lifestyle with more mobility



# LIVIN' ON A RIVER

**Chris Niskanen**

Ever imagine living a modern Tom Sawyer life year-round?

A four-season luxury houseboat can be yours for about \$299,000, not including mooring fees, fuel and septic pumping.

Think of it as a floating condominium, except you could drive it to New Orleans.

Visitors to the Minneapolis Boat Show, which opens Wednesday at the Minneapolis Convention Center, are often sold on the "boating lifestyle," whether they are buying a 16-foot runabout or 60-foot yacht.

Most boaters, however, vacate the water when winter arrives.

SkipperLiner, which has been building house and passenger boats since 1971 in La Crosse, Wis., will have a very different customer in mind when the company displays its new 48-foot Condo Cruiser 480 at the Boat Show.

"This is a houseboat that can be used year-round in Minneapolis," said SkipperLiner executive vice president Todd Jordan, 37, whose father owns the company. "It's truly the lifestyle baby boomers are seeking. It's a dash of adventure."

This is not a houseboat cobbled together in your uncle's backyard.

The Condo Cruiser is built with insulated walls, windows and roof. It is outfitted with a heat pump and furnace, bedrooms on the main floor and a bathroom below deck. It is like a small apartment except it is built on a reinforced hull that can withstand being locked in ice during the winter.

In the past, SkipperLiner built larger, more expensive houseboats, some as long as 80 feet, with two decks and costing up to \$1 million.

What distinguishes the Condo Cruiser 480 is its size and price.

"The trend in the past few years was bigger was better," Jordan said. "With the changes we've seen in the market, folks want to simplify. The Cruiser is priced in the \$200,000s, and the size is less than 50 feet. Finding a slip for a 70-foot boat isn't always easy."

Minnesota has about 1,000 registered houseboats, many of them rental units on border waters such as Rainy Lake.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SKIPPERLINER

**This four-season houseboat**, the Condo Cruiser made by SkipperLiner of La Crosse, Wis., can be moored and lived in during the winter. One of these 48-foot houseboat models will be at the Minneapolis Boat Show, which opens Wednesday.

**TOP:** SkipperLiner believes four-season houseboats and yachts could become popular among baby boomers.

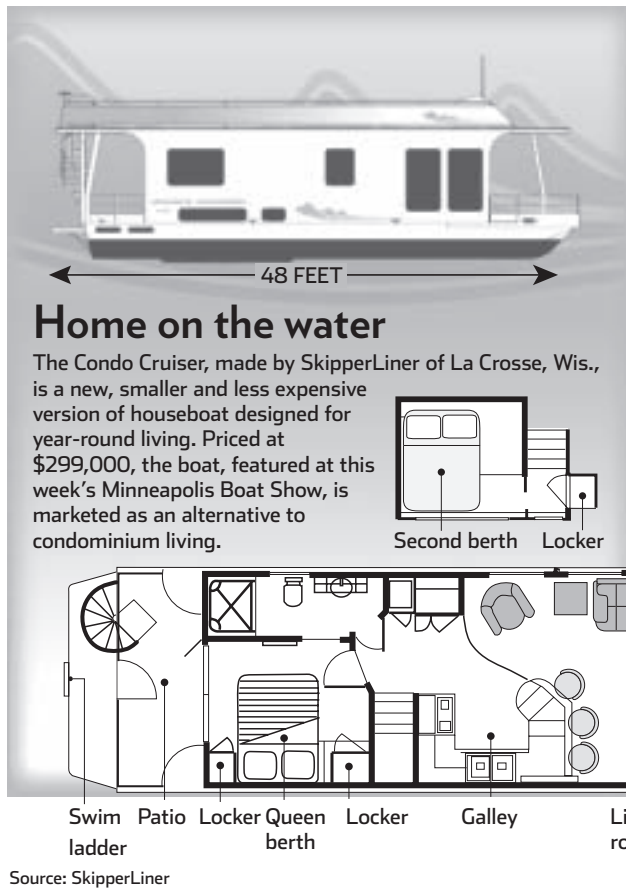
(SkipperLiner has sold 45 boats to Rainy Lake Houseboats, a rental operation, over the years.) But some owners live year-round on their houseboats; a few enclaves of year-round houseboaters can be found along the Mississippi River in St. Paul and Inver Grove Heights.

Jordan said SkipperLiner has its own community of year-round houseboaters moored near its headquarters in La Crosse. Last year, two customers from South Dakota bought a year-round boat and moored it at the company's slips. The couple named their 65-foot boat "At Ease" and use it as a central location where family members, include children in college in Wisconsin, can get together, Jordan said.

Mooring fees, electricity and septic fees cost the houseboaters about \$4,000 annually, Jordan said.

"During the winter, they come in once a month and spend four days, and in the summer, they are here two or three weekends a month. It's just like having a cabin. On a Saturday morning in the summer, they untie and head out for a river trip."

Jordan estimated that in the



Source: SkipperLiner

- Engines: Twin, 220-hp, gas-powered MerCruiser
- Air conditioning and heat: Lennox heat pump with furnace
- Year-round package: 2-inch composite insulated walls, insulated roof and insulated windows.
- Water capacity: 150 gallons
- Septic capacity: 100 gallons.
- Other features: Full-size galley with cabinets and appliances; queen-size bed in master bedroom on main deck and queen-size bed in downstairs room; 32-inch television and home theater package.

### Home on the water

The Condo Cruiser, made by SkipperLiner of La Crosse, Wis., is a new, smaller and less expensive version of houseboat designed for year-round living. Priced at \$299,000, the boat, featured at this week's Minneapolis Boat Show, is marketed as an alternative to condominium living.

Upper Midwest, there are probably 150 year-round SkipperLiner houseboats in use. He

lived in one for three years. "It certainly helps when I sit down with a customer to talk

about buying a houseboat," Jordan said of his experience. The Condo Cruiser comes

### IF YOU GO

#### MINNEAPOLIS BOAT SHOW

**When:** Wednesday-Sunday

**Where:** Minneapolis Convention Center

**Hours:** 5-10 p.m. Wednesday; noon-10 p.m. Thursday and Friday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday

**Admission:** \$10 for adults; \$5 for children 13-15; free for children 12 and younger. Seniors are admitted for \$5 on Thursday. Discount coupons for adults are available at participating dealers, Cub Foods stores and Subway restaurants.

**Features:** Boat and marine exhibitors, including everything from canoes to yachts. Pro wakeboarders will perform on-water stunts in "Rail Jam" on the show floor; seminars on sailing; a special "affordability" pavilion for buyers looking for deals; appearances by "Jack Sparrow of the Twin Cities" and SpongeBob SquarePants.

with twin, 220-horsepower, gas-powered engines. Jordan said the company trains new houseboat owners to drive their craft. The boat can travel in water as shallow as three feet, which means boaters can access many of the backwaters of rivers such as the Mississippi.

"The customers who own At Ease had never owned a boat like that. In about a month, we had them trained to operate it themselves," Jordan said.

After talking to Jordan, I got out a pencil and did some figuring. My wife and I could sell the house and furniture and buy a houseboat. Gone would be chores such as mowing the lawn, plowing snow from the driveway and raking leaves.

Fishing from the front porch? That sounds like the life for me.