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Chris-Craft Commander connoisseurs congregate at Mentor Lagoons Marina



Alarik von Hofsten of Sweden displays an image of his Chris Craft Commander 31 inside Pat & Ron Smoker's 38-foot Commander sedan during the 2018 Chris-Craft Commander Club National Rendezvous at Mentor Lagoons Marina July 28. Jonathan Tressler — The News-Herald
By [Jonathan Tressler](#), *The News-Herald*

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Three Chris-Craft Commanders of varying lengths grace the waters at Mentor Lagoons Marina July 28 during the 2018 Chris-Craft Commander Club National Rendezvous. Jonathan Tressler — The News-Herald

Whether the company knew it or not, when [Chris-Craft Boats](#) introduced its first line of all-fiberglass production vessel — the Commander — it created a niche that would attract boating enthusiasts around the world to its unique charms.

First produced in 1964, the Chris-Craft Commander immediately garnered attention for the recreational boating community for its sleek lines; large, well-appointed cabin and living area and sturdy, reinforced fiberglass hull.

Today, the [various Chris-Craft Commander models](#) have become the epicenter of a boating subculture whose members hail from all over the world. And likely nowhere in the world was the camaraderie surrounding the Chris-Craft Commander boats more alive and well than at [Mentor Lagoons Marina](#) during the three-day [2018 Chris-Craft Commander Club National Rendezvous](#).

The event, which runs July 27-29, attracted dozens of participants and about 10 boats, said Charlene Pike, the Chris-Craft Commander Club's archivist.

About 2:30 p.m. on July 28 she said the event was running smoothly and its participants were having a great time in great weather in a great city.

"It's been absolutely wonderful," she said. "The weather has been super and the people here have just been a joy to work with. Seriously - the hospitality has just

been superb. I mean, I've been doing event planning for years and years and, honestly, this stands out as probably the best I've had so far. And that's easy to say. Anything we've asked has been no problem. Everyone here at the marina, the city officials we've worked with, Rob Kneen (from [Lawnfield Inn & Suites](#)) and [Sky Bistro](#) have all just been wonderful."

She said the plan for a Chris-Craft Commander Club rendezvous in Mentor was hatched back in December when she met Kneen, who mentioned he happened to have a hotel in Mentor just a hop, skip and a jump from two local marinas, along with a restaurant with plenty of room to host out-of-town mariners for such an event.

And so it went. She said planning got serious in January and everything came together famously.

But don't just take it from the rendezvous' chief organizer. The boaters who motored into town seemed to think it was a great event, too, a chance to commiserate over their favorite boats, talk shop and enjoy each other's company.

Take Paul Phillips, for example. As the owner of [Phillips Marine](#) in Grand River, he didn't have to travel too far to enjoy the event and show off a Commander restoration project he holds close to his heart: a 1965, 38-foot Chris-Craft Commander named Murphy's Law which was passed on to him by customer-turned-friend, the late John J. Murphy, who brought the boat to his shop five years ago, looking to have it restored.

"I said I'd like to do something a little different with it," Phillips said, pointing out the fact that most of the Commanders on hand are painted a kind of creamy, off-white hue. "He said: 'OK. It's your canvas. I trust you 'cause I've seen what you've done.'"

So Phillips decided to paint her white, he said of the work in progress, adding that they just don't make 'em like these anymore.

"You just can't buy anything like this anymore," he said. "So that's why it's nice to get together like this. It's the love of the water, the appreciation of the craft that brings us all together like this. It's just a good time."

In another 38-foot vessel — a 1967 Commander sedan named Summer Song and hailing from [Geneva Marina](#) - a group of Commander connoisseurs relaxed, shared memories, traded stories, tips and the tricks of the trade before catching the shuttle to Sky Bistro for the rendezvous' awards banquet.

Owners Pat & Ron Smoker, who live in Austinburg and, like Phillips, were gracious enough to invite this reporter on board to check out their floating vacation property, as it were, shared their take on the event and Chris-Craft Commander ownership in general.

"It's like a moving vacation home," Ron Smoker said. "It's very seasonal. We put it in the water in May and take it out in September."

Of course, the short season he and Pat pursue can be attributed to Northeast Ohio's lengthy winter and the ice on Lake Erie that goes along with it.

So, he said, a gathering like the one at Mentor Lagoons is a special treat.

"There's a certain camaraderie about it," he said. "We're all interested in restoring, to a certain extent, some nostalgia we're trying to recapture."

Poland, Ohio resident Mac McCreery, who also owns a 38-foot Commander Express sedan named Pioneer, concurred.

"We like to exchange information and that's very important," he said. "You come to a gathering like this and you check out the other boats. You pick up a lot of tricks and tips. Maybe you see something on someone else's boat that you might want on your own boat — or not. But you get a lot of different input and you get to learn a lot. That's important."

Perhaps no one at the 2018 Chris-Craft Commander Rendezvous embodied the commitment and dedication ingrained in the vessels' following than a fellow from Sweden who attended the event.

Alarik von Hofsten hails from [Värmdö Municipality](#), Stockholm County in east central Sweden and owns one of five Chris-Craft Commanders — a 31-foot Express which sports a hard top - in that country.

Twenty years ago, Hofsten — with only minimal help from what the Internet was at the time — purchased his 1966 Commander from some 4,000 miles away, had it refurbished and today enjoys the craft with his family, exploring the 25,000 islands of varying sizes throughout the [Stockholm Archipelago](#) in the Baltic Sea.

He said his affection for boating stems from the fact that his father, who was a commander in the [Royal Swedish Navy](#), had him sailing since he was a kid.

After years piloting sailing vessels, he and his family decided it was time to move into the motoring realm, trading the burden of making the trip with a sailing vessel to where it could be properly launched, along with all the labor-intensive tasks associated with setting sail for the ease and comfort associated with piloting a motor cruiser like a Commander.

"In the summer of 1997, we said: 'Let's have a look around at some (power boats). I knew of a reputable broker in Stockholm and, there, the first boat I saw was a 31 Commander,'" he said. "It looked good to me. It looked like a boat should look, I thought."

After about a month's worth of negotiating, he said he finally decided to "pull the trigger" on the purchase. Unfortunately, though, it had by that time been sold.

So, to make a long story short, he found the boat he owns now in Florida, had a consultant look it over for him, decided it was a worthy purchase and made it.

But that was just the beginning. After buying the boat, Hofsten had to arrange for it to be freighted to Sweden, have it shipped there to his location and then have a crew restore it - about a nine-month project.

Dealing with all those moving parts seems to have been worthwhile, however, as Hofsten beams when he talks and shares photos of his Commander.

He probably summed it up best: “It’s good fun.”

A rundown of Chris-Craft Commander variations

When Chris Craft introduced the 38’ Commander in 1964 it was the first of a series of cruisers built [entirely in fiberglass](#).

Based on the fact the original founders of this Club all had 1st generation Chris Craft Commanders, the Club’s initial focus was on these boats, built in 1964 though the mid-1970s. That period happened to overlap with the time span of Chris-Craft’s archive now administered by the [Mariners Museum](#) in Portsmouth, Va. Hence, for boats built in that era, finding historic data is relatively easy. Providing you know the hull number of your boat, you can order an extensive information package about the boat from the museum.

The model name “Commander” dates back much longer this. The first Chris-Craft model with this name was actually a 34-foot cabin cruiser from 1943 and there are still mahogany Commanders from the 1950s available on the market.

Although Chris Craft never defined any sub categories of Commanders it is helpful to make such a categorization to make it easier for those not familiar with Chris Craft Commanders:

- 19-30 foot Commanders (“Weekend Commanders”)
- 31-38 foot Commanders (“Mainstream Commanders”)
- 41-47 foot Commanders (“Large Commanders”)
- 55-60 foot Commanders (“Mega Commanders”)

[WEEKEND COMMANDERS](#)

Weekend Commanders come in lengths from 19 feet up to 30 feet and are excellent boats for weekend fun. Some are pure runabouts in the reminiscent of the boating style Chris Craft helped forming in the 1920s. Others are more suitable as a small sport fisherman or entertaining guests on short cruises. The largest boats in this range do provide for the odd overnighter, but basically is not intended to be used as such.

[MAINSTREAM COMMANDERS](#)

Mainstream Commanders come in lengths from 31 feet up to 38 feet, and own their label “mainstream” to the simple fact that they represent by far the largest number of Commanders built. They are all boats that will accommodate your family for long cruises with overnight stays or provide for ample entertainment opportunities at sea or in port.

[LARGE COMMANDERS](#)

Large Commanders come in lengths from 41 feet up to 47 feet. They typically feature double staterooms, dual heads and shower cabins. Some of the models were available with different interior layouts. They are all boats that will accommodate your family or friends for extended cruises and provide for ample entertainment opportunities.

MEGA COMMANDERS

The Mega Commanders were the state of the art luxury yachts of their time. Today, they are still awesome crafts that attract attention anywhere they go thanks to their classic design and attractive looks. Only 52 of these yachts were built.

Source:<http://commanderclub.com/page/models>

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