

Q&A: 'FOX & FRIENDS'
LAUREN GREEN, P. 28

TO DINE FOR: DENVER'S
FRESH EATS, P. 66

AUGUST 2006



nwa

WorldTraveler



SEATTLE'S HOUSEBOATS

No longer a bohemian enclave,
floating homes still draw those
with a taste for adventure

HONG KONG REVEALED

An insider's tips to venturing
just off the beaten path

A Long Weekend:

Black Hills, South Dakota

nwa.com check-in

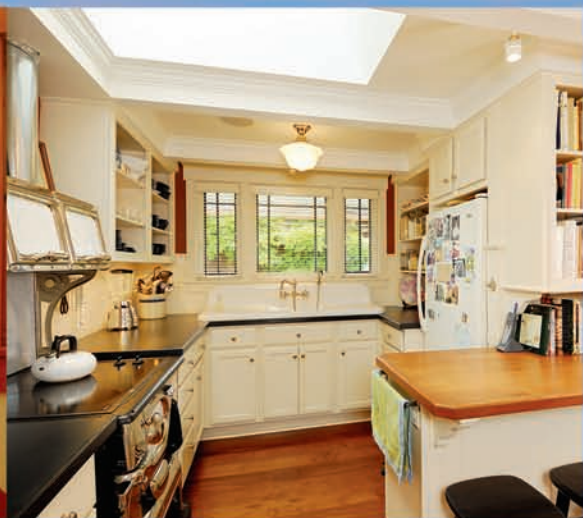


Todd and Krissy Biernacki renovated this 1,480-square-foot gem in Seattle's Portage Bay neighborhood. Pictured (middle) is Krissy and the couple's toddler, Devon.



Playing with a Full Deck

No longer the bohemian enclave of the past, Seattle's floating homes still draw those with a taste for adventure.



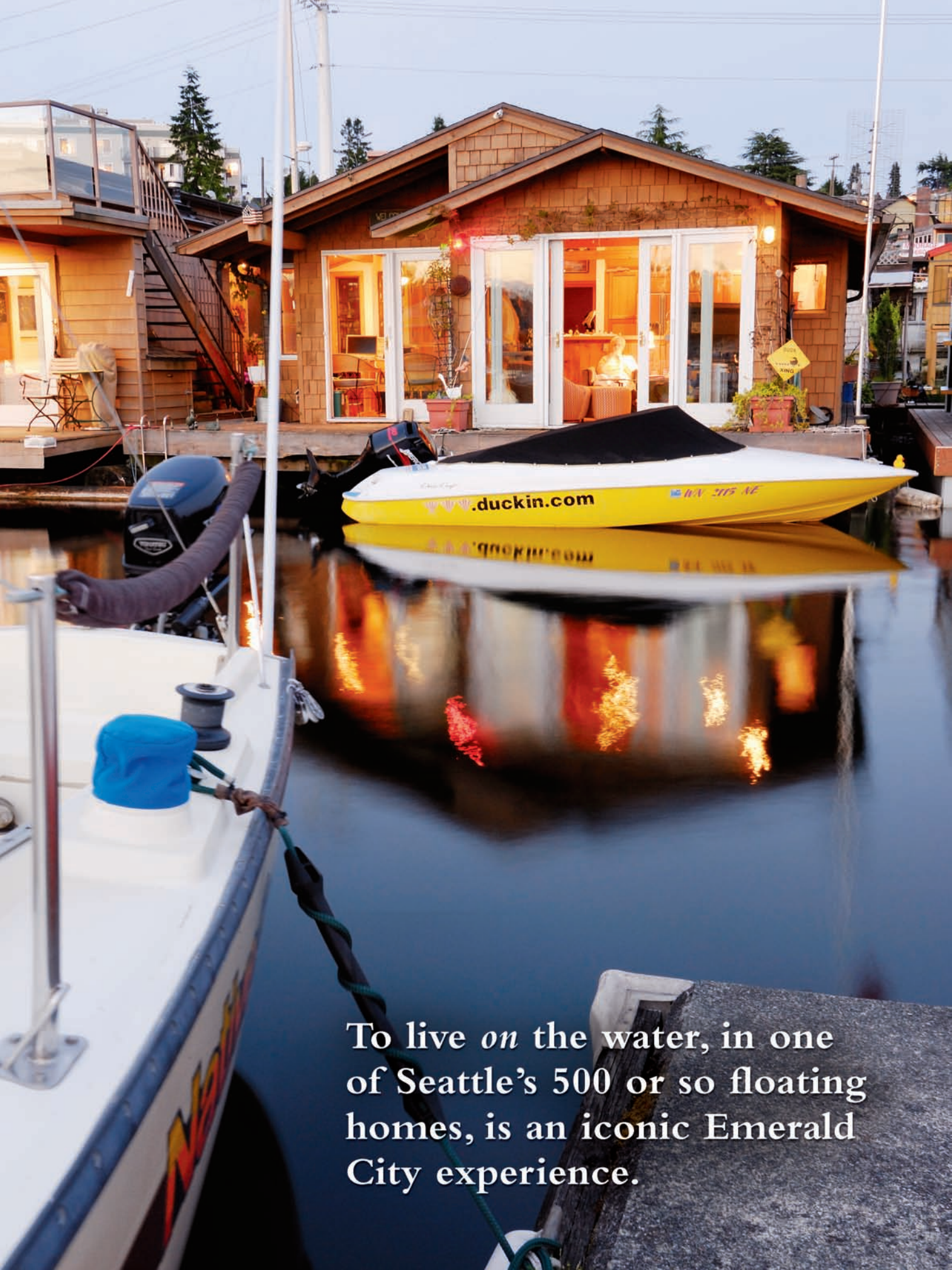
In a city with more than three square miles of lakes, canals and bays, waterfront property is at a premium. And to live *on* the water, in one of Seattle's 500 or so floating homes, is an iconic Emerald City experience. The "liveaboard" neighborhood of barges, sailboats and homes floating on logs or polyurethane barrels is most commonly called the houseboat community—though residents flip the terminology to their liking. It's an area renowned for attracting the intrepid and the romantic, laid-back folks who don't mind ducks pecking on the front door for handouts or kayakers gawking at dinnertime.

"Uptight," laughs Rick Miner, a houseboat resident, "is not an option down here."

The motley community of big and small colorful bungalows, slipshod shacks and chic architectural wonders skirt the perimeters of Portage Bay and Lake Union. Here, your lawn is the lake and the natural light, wildlife, peace and quiet, and not infrequent parties draw all walks of life. Yet despite income levels or social standings, neighbors tend to

Story by Ali Basye

Photography by Will Austin



To live *on* the water, in one of Seattle's 500 or so floating homes, is an iconic Emerald City experience.

stick together and a sense of camaraderie prevails.

“It’s addictive,” Miner says. “We’re all living the dream.”

WATER DANCERS: THE BIERNACKI FAMILY

It may seem odd that a man who suffers from seasickness would live aboard a floating home. Added to that is the fact that Todd Biernacki, along with his wife, Krissy, teach social dance lessons—one-step, fox trot, Savoy swing and the like—in their buoyant living room. One would think the combination of Lindy hops and a rocking boat would be a recipe for disaster. But the Biernackis’ Portage Bay floating home, bought in 1992 after renting another houseboat for a year and falling in love with the houseboat lifestyle, is moored far enough back on the dock that rolling waves are buffered by other houses.

“I love it here, but I couldn’t take it if there was motion,” Todd confesses.

Looking around the 1,480-square-foot floating home, with its handcrafted built-ins, shiny antique wood floors, artistically wrought railings and front porch “perennial garden,” one can imagine that a person would put up with a lot to live aboard this gem.

The renovation, completed over the course of three years, was Todd’s own doing. From the fine, elegant carpentry to the plumbing, design, permits, and electric and underwater maintenance (houseboat owners must dive beneath their homes to adjust flotation devices and make needed repairs), the bungalow is his first masterwork.

“I just don’t have a fear of building,” he shrugs. “And I have a lot of patience.”

Krissy, the gardener in the family, is quick to point out the home’s eco-friendly features, explaining the couple’s passion for keeping things

green. Maple floors were reclaimed and shipped from an old mill in North Carolina, and the kitchen’s 150-year-old teak floors came from a government building in Indonesia. Nearly all furniture and building materials throughout are recycled or sustainable. Closer inspection finds many antique kitchen and bathroom fixtures have been gutted and modernized with 21st-century conveniences.

In 2004, the couple, now both 40, welcomed their first child, Devon, into the family, making their floating home one of the few with toddlers on board. Todd went to work baby-proofing—crafting locking gates and a playful porch railing from copper refrigerator tubing. At 7 months, Devon began swimming lessons. A second baby is due in December, inspiring additional improvements to accommodate another little one.

JUST DUCKY: THE MINERS

Some people love living on the water so much they can’t tear themselves

away, even to clock in for a day at the office. Such is the case for Joyce and Rick Miner, 54 and 60, respectively, both realtors who parlayed their passion for houseboats into a top-selling brand, DuckIn.com, a clever Web site celebrating—and selling—the houseboat lifestyle and featuring a yellow toy rubber ducky as its official mascot.

“It’s all about the duck!” laughs Rick. “When I hit on that, it all came together.”

Sure enough, ducks of all kinds find their way to the Miners’ two side-by-side houseboats, which measure 800 square feet each and sit on a coveted dock along the eastern shore of Lake Union. Neighborhood codes forbid the couple to expand their tiny cottage skyward, so when the place next door became available, they snapped up that house for their home office. Now their daily commute is a quick jump from one slip to the other. Instead of facing skyscrapers, the Miners’ office now looks out on the tall masts

STAY ON A FLOATING B&B

With sailboats ripping back and forth, languid sunsets washing across the water, and a menagerie of comical wildlife to watch, Seattle’s Lake Union provides the perfect base camp for exploring temperate Emerald City, any season of the year. The downtown core is located just five minutes away, so intrepid visitors might make the most of the lake’s natural beauty and ditch the hotel for a rented houseboat.

Acadia Houseboat Rentals (\$105–\$250/night; 206-200-8636; seattlehouseboatrentals.com) offers five different houseboats or floating barges moored in a lakeside marina at the heart of the trendiest floating home neighborhood, Roanoke Reef. These private inns sleep up to six people and kitchens come equipped with light breakfast fixings that can be enjoyed alfresco on the outdoor deck. Be aware that Acadia’s boats are traditional moored houseboats—not fixed floating homes, which are permanent structures—and will bob and rock in the lake’s gentle waters as any watercraft would. In spite of this, houseboat rentals cannot be taken out on the lake for a spin, so those itching to feel the wind in their hair can rent watercraft—sailboat, electric boat, kayak, rowboat or canoe—from one of several nearby rental agencies, including **Moss Bay Rowing and Kayak Club** (877-244-8896; mossbay.net) and **The Electric Boat Company** (206-223-7476; theelectricboatco.com). —A. B.



Left: Rick and Joyce Miner’s home (center) and office (left) sit side by side on Seattle’s Lake Union.



Instead of facing skyscrapers, the Miners' office now looks out on the tall masts of sailboats.

of sailboats.

The couple's own side-by-side double-wide is funky and charming. Work blends with life and life blends with work, as the couple meets the challenge all houseboat owners face: storage. And then there are the ducks. The Miners' expanding rubber ducky collection makes way for almost any member of the species, including live ones that waddle onto the front porch for a few Cheerios.

Working and living on the docks has been good to the Miners. Today Rick is selling more properties than ever (though an average of only one or two floating homes are available for sale each year) and serves as unofficial "captain" of the area. Often dressed in yellow, he tours the digs on his yellow boat, calling out to neighbors and snapping shots with his digital camera.

"People always want to know how many square feet I'm selling and I tell them, 'This is not a square-foot purchase. This is a lifestyle,'" Rick says.

The couple admits vacations don't happen too much anymore, other than visiting family members in California, in lieu of enjoying their life on the lake.

"Why would we leave?" Rick asks. "When we're out there we just want to get back here. On the houseboat we're living on vacation all the time."

CITY MICE: THE ELLINGSONS

"I wasn't ready for a condo yet," Paul Ellingson says from the tiered roof deck of his floating home. "There's more uniqueness to the houseboats."

Paul and his wife, Linda, both 58,



Above: Inside the Miners' office. **Inset:** Joyce Miner shares a spot on the deck with some ducks.

knew that when the kids moved away, the grown-ups would play, and decided to purchase an in-city weekend home away from their routine suburban lives and the duties of running Bargreen-Ellingson, their restaurant design, build and supply business based in Tacoma, Wash., about 45 miles to the south.

A condo originally seemed the



SEE THE BOATS FOR YOURSELF

If you don't have the opportunity to stay on a floating home yourself, you can still get a peek at the enviable lifestyle aboard a maritime houseboat tour, which motors the uninitiated smack through Seattle's buoyant neighborhood. Jeri Callahan, the self-appointed "Houseboat Lady" and area historian, leads one-hour guided **Discover Houseboating** tours by way of electric boat. The vessel quietly glides past canals of liveaboards large and small, while Callahan treats visitors to an entertaining history peppered with folksy anecdotes.

Rates: Daily tours throughout the year; \$40/person with a minimum of four people; 206-322-9157; discoverhouseboating.com.

A less expensive option is the popular **Sunday Ice Cream Cruise**, a 45-minute Lake Union Tour—houseboats included—aboard a small ferryboat.

Rates: Year-round; \$5-\$8, ice cream costs a little extra; 206-713-8446; seattleferryservice.com. —A. B.

The Ellingsons' tiered roof deck is a great place to relax on the weekend.

smart way to go, but downtown prices were skyrocketing, and when the couple expanded their search they found that condo to floating home per-square-foot prices weren't as disparate as they imagined. Plus, they knew it would be a solid investment. Linda, a semi-retired voice teacher, set to work finding the just-right floating home, taking into consideration Paul's two requests: It must have a parking space and a boat slip.

Their 2,000-square-foot floating home in Mallard Cove, a private buoyant community of large, newer structures, had both things and then some. The two-story, two-bedroom house had been completely renovated by the previous tenant—a bachelor whose design sensibilities leaned toward the dramatic—about four years ago. The master bath features a climbing wall—at 8 feet it's more decorative than functional—and an organic, amorphous sink and walk-in shower are made of polished stones gathered from the San Juan Islands, an archipelago of windswept isles 90 miles to the north.

The home was purchased just under a year ago, and Paul admits they are still getting their sea legs and feeling their way around their new weekend digs.

"I haven't been here long enough to know if I could live here year-round," he says. "But I know I like the people, and the sense of community is what I remember from growing up as a kid. People look out for each other, and you can't find that easily anymore."

For now, Paul and Linda look



forward to long weekends with visiting friends and family before returning to the suburbs for the workdays. They've already established traditions: Dump the Chris-Craft boat in the water, pick up some friends, and have a cocktail party on nearby Lake Washington (Lake Union is a no-wake zone and Paul "likes to go fast") or motor to one of the city's 19 restaurants accessible by water for a tasty meal.

"This," Paul says, "is what suburbia should be. Quiet nights, saying hello to your neighbors, and just enjoying life." ▼

Ali Basye is a freelance writer and editor based in Seattle, Wash.

Rick and Joyce Miner
Certified Residential Specialists
Coldwell Banker Bain
206-940-1180 • 888-207-1466
www.DUCKIN.com