



BY MICHAEL PETERS

SIGHTLINES

Out with a Bang

PARTIERS WITH BOATS BIGGER THAN BRAINS DEEP-SIX A HAPPY TRADITION.



Fireworks light the East River for New York's Fourth of July celebration. Got a comment for Michael? Give him a shout at inbox@pmymag.com.

Like many coastal towns across America, Sarasota puts on a pretty good fireworks show for the Fourth of July. For the past 28 years the city has hosted the annual Suncoast Offshore Powerboat Races on that weekend, making it by far the biggest local event of the year. With prerace parades, race-pit viewing, and the race itself, it draws a huge turnout. All of this of course culminates with a big Independence Day fireworks show.

You can view the fireworks from Island Park, Marina Jack, or the downtown condos, but by far the most exciting venue is on a boat. Now imagine that we have lots of boaters here already. Add in all of the out-of-town friends and race fans, and you start to get the picture. All these boats show up before dark and wrangle for space with a couple hundred other boats all stuffed with partiers. The county sheriff, police, and marine patrol boats all do their best to keep order and keep everyone "behind the line."

One year we arrived early with a boatload of friends in our 25-foot Bertram *Villam* and got right up front just across from the fireworks launching pad on the point at Island Park. My girls were still young and they sat atop our white canvas half-tower for the best view. The fireworks started shortly after dark and what ensued was 45 minutes of sheer awe and terror. We were right under the exploding fireworks and the noise was deafening. The ashes and spent cartridges were raining down on our boat to the

point that we worried about catching fire. It felt like we were in a scene right out of *Apocalypse Now*. It was spectacular, but we were too close. It was more terrifying than fun, so we vowed never to anchor so close to the action again.

About three years ago, with a small group aboard *Villam*, we made our annual trek to Island Park for the fireworks. We anchored near the back, so we could leave a little early and avoid the mass chaos of everyone pulling anchor at one time. While I chose to head home slowly, I would say I was in the one-percent minority. Everyone else weighs anchor at the same time and hits the throttle, in the dark. It is pure insanity, pure mayhem, but it's the same every year. No sheriff, police, or marine patrol to be seen.

Then it happens. While we're running slowly and safely, I glance toward my stern and see the hull of a 35-foot express cruiser looming above our transom, ready to overtake us. I hit the throttle and jolt out from beneath the boat before it can crash into our cockpit. The driver finally sees us and slows, so I then come alongside him and unleash my full lexicon of salty expletives; his wife gets the full blast of my anger. My wife ducks for cover out of embarrassment. I yell to them that they almost killed us and his wife meekly hol-

lers back that they didn't see us and are very sorry. By the time I finish with them, I am betting she'll later unleash a tirade at her husband at home and say, "Sell the damn boat!" These people didn't belong out in a boat that night, maybe ever, but especially not on plane in the dark, with their bow pointed skywards. They were simply pushed along in the herd of partiers all of whom had bigger boats than brains. No one was thinking.

We watched the fireworks from the beach this year same as we did last year. No more annual Fourth of July on Mike's boat. I hate it, I miss it. Now we have grandchildren and we want to take them out to watch the fireworks. But we won't, because we are afraid to. We are not going to join in the insanity on a dark overcrowded waterway with a bunch of boaters that throw away all common sense.

In 1957 Olin Stephens said it was like going to a "drowning party." He could just as well have been talking about 2012, referring to the tragic capsizing accident off Long Island this Fourth of July with 27 people crowded aboard a 34-foot powerboat, leaving three children dead. Or he could be referring to Sarasota or any other coastal city, on any Fourth of July. □