

CORONAVIRUS

The yachting crowd was gearing up for a booming 2020 sailing season. Then the coronavirus happened.

The Bahamas deployed warships to enforce its port restrictions, one of several new hindrances to a big boat lifestyle.



— David Geffen's yacht, the Rising Sun, is more than 450 feet long. It has another yacht, Rising Sun Cat, that docks inside. Gregory Rec / Portland Press Herald/Getty Images file

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By Sawyer Click

If you were one of the lucky Americans to own a yacht before the coronavirus shut down the country, you were probably on the water.

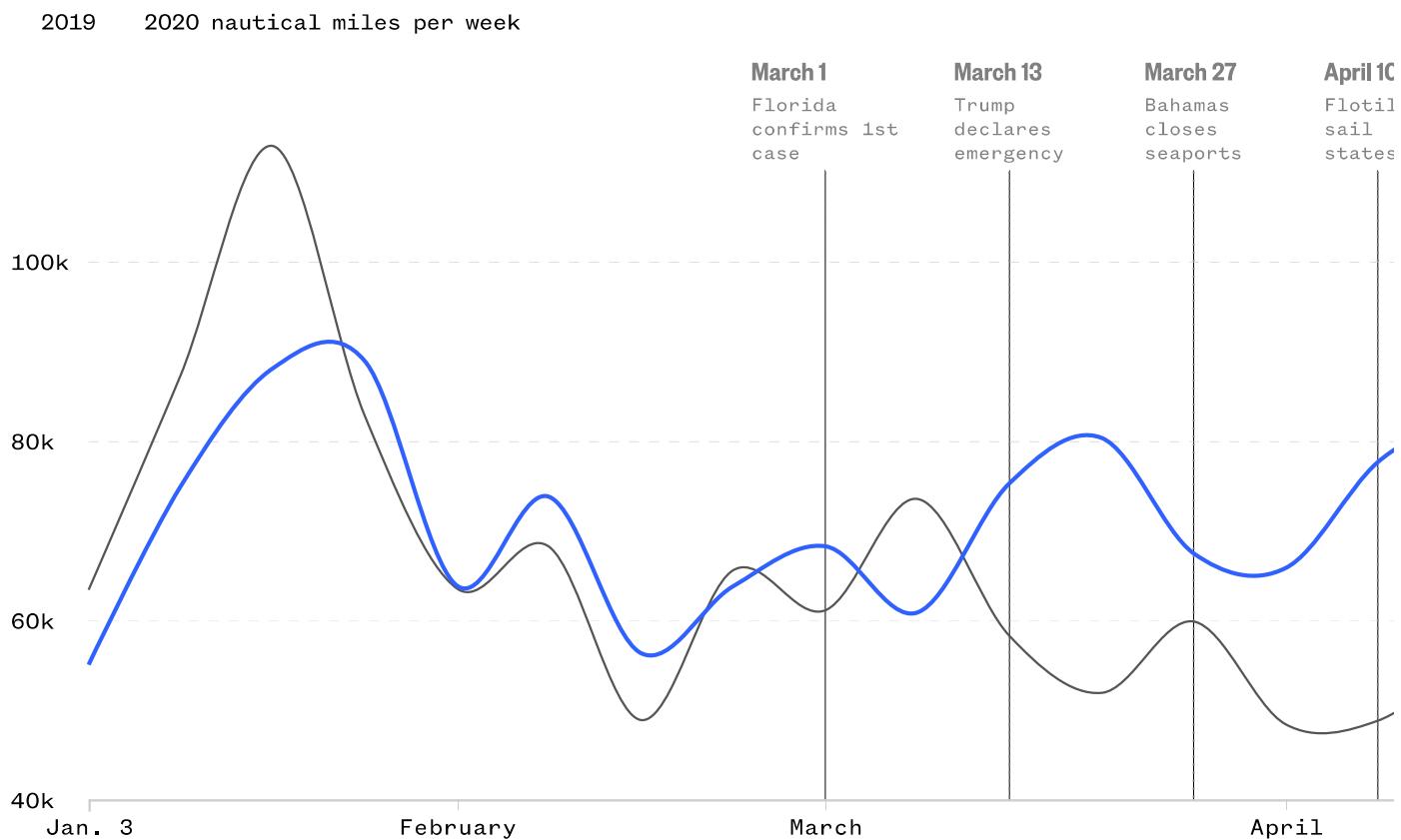
In the first three months of the year, the average yacht sailed farther than the year before, according to an NBC News analysis of [MarineTraffic](#) boat-location data of 514 U.S.-flagged yachts at least 90 feet long.

For the billionaire [David Geffen](#), that meant sailing around the South Pacific on Rising Sun, his longer-than-a-football-field superyacht, which includes another boat, the Rising Sun Cat, which docks inside. Like-minded superyacht owners followed suit, ditching the perils of sheltering at home – customer limits at grocery stores and [trading designer clothes for toilet paper](#), among other struggles – for life at sea.

But after President Donald [Trump declared a national emergency on March 13](#), ship travel plummeted. What looked like a big season ahead for the yachting crowd turned anything but as the coronavirus spread, shelter-in-place orders were issued and island coastal borders were tightened.

Anchors down

Superyachts started sailing back stateside in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.



Notes

Weeks start on Friday.

Source: NBC News analysis of [MarineTraffic](#) ship data.

Graphic: Sawyer Click / NBC News

Superyachts are generally at least 90 feet long, according to several superyacht club managers in Florida. The vessels typically have a paid crew on board and come with multiple bedrooms and lounging areas.

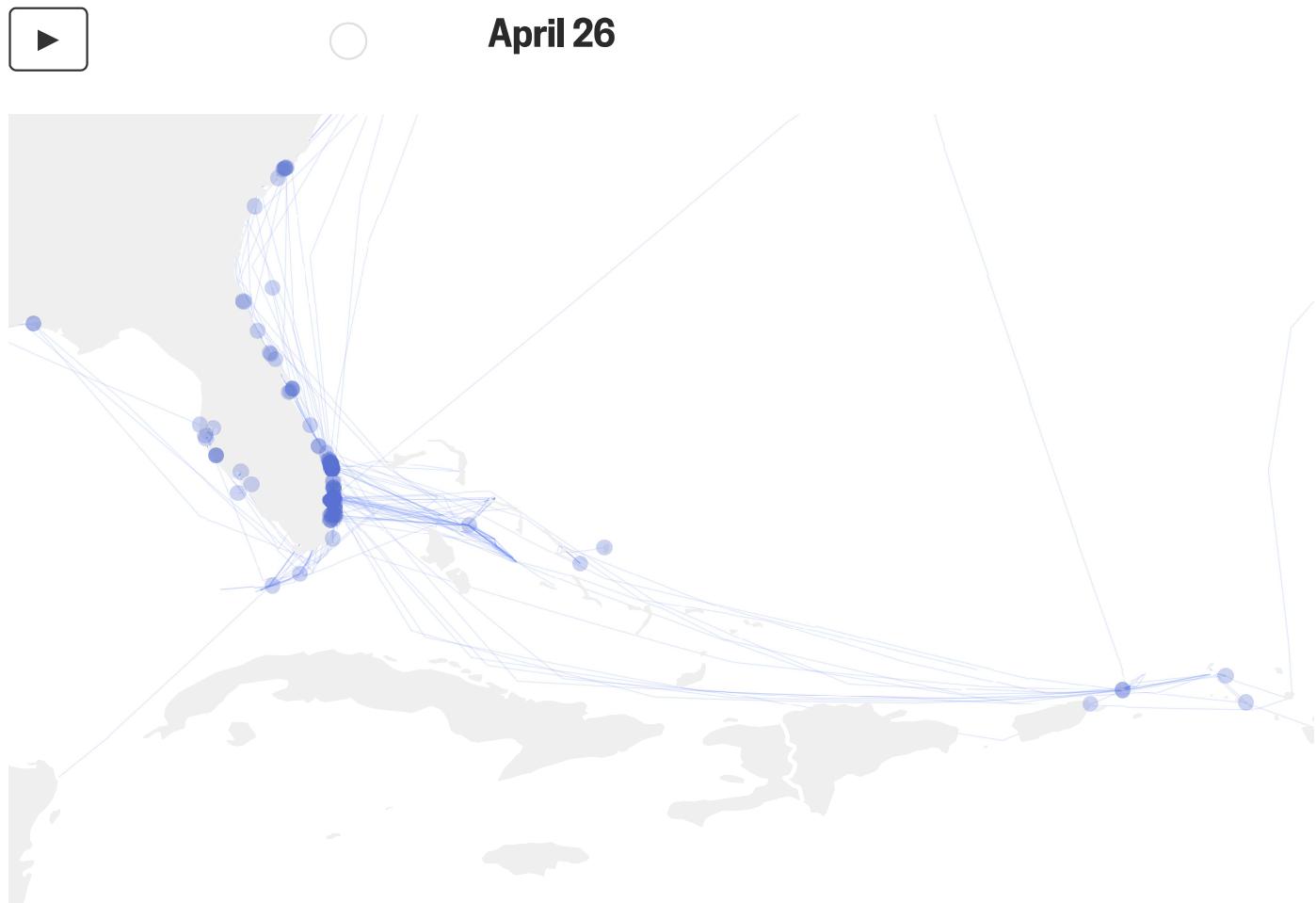
“You know it when you see it,” said Enrique Quintero, the general manager at the superyacht club Prime Marina in Miami.

For superyacht owners, the go-to spots before the [national emergency declaration](#) were the Florida Keys, the Bahamas and the Caribbean: paradises that had little-to-no confirmed coronavirus cases and were still mostly open. Yachting season for the region was at its peak for the year, with nearly 65 superyachts stretched throughout the region. After Trump’s declaration, four-fifths of the ships set sail for the U.S. At the same time in 2019, there were three times as many U.S.-flagged yachts in the Caribbean.

As [states began to issue stay-at-home orders](#) and the country ground to a halt, the yachting season became less about leisure and more about finding somewhere to shelter in place.

Superyachts head home

In the weeks following Trump's declaration of a national emergency, four-fifths of the superyachts in the Caribbean sailed to the mainland U.S.



Source: NBC News analysis of MarineTraffic ship data.

Graphic: Sawyer Click / NBC News

“A lot of people had that idea that, ‘Oh, I’m going to jump on my boat’”

Phil Brassington, a Florida-based shipwright who specializes in long-term sailing equipment, has worked late nights and weekends since February to keep up with increased customer demand. Though some of his customers made it to sea, several puttered out around the Keys, stuck stateside because of [travel restrictions](#). From yacht shipwrights to yacht salesmen, work in the industry has picked up as affluent customers come calling.

“I’ve been very busy, because as COVID-19 unfolded, a lot of people had that idea that, ‘Oh, I’m going to jump on my boat and leave,’” Brassington, who has lived with his wife and two children on their catamaran for the last few years, said.

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Among those eager to escape the pandemic was Brian Harmon, 57, a retired restaurateur and chef. As coronavirus case numbers began to ramp up in mid-March, Harmon made plans to leave the mainland on his catamaran, Salty Dreams.

“I was not going to participate in the insanity,” said Harmon, who lives on Florida’s mainland when he’s not sailing. “So I decided that I thought the best way to a quarantine would be to hop aboard Salty Dreams and get off land.”

— David Geffen's yacht Rising Sun at dock in Portland, Maine, in 2013.

Gregory Rec / Portland Press Herald/Getty Images file

Within a week he had built a [crew solicited from an online sailing forum](#) and had cast off for the Florida Keys. In the weeks since, he’s spent most of his time fishing, tinkering with the boat and watching “Peaky Blinders” on Netflix when there’s an internet connection. His crew consists of a married couple from upstate New York in it for the experience. The wife, an attorney, works by phone whenever she can and the husband is often away on Harmon’s dinghy exploring.

In mid-April, after a month or so at sea, Harmon was out of groceries and had to turn around as popular islands in the Keys restricted travel. At Key West, the dockmaster held onto Harmon’s driver’s license while he deboarded for an hour to get gas and groceries. At Marathon, he wasn’t allowed to leave his boat at all. The inconsistency and lack of freedom drove him to turn Salty Dreams around for a slow-paced float back to mainland Florida.

Despite droves of boats such as Salty Dreams sailing home, yacht salesmen are keeping busy, according to Michael Costa, a salesman based in California. His company, [SeaNet](#), deals in selling

whole yachts and shares of yachts, akin to a timeshare.

In the past few weeks, he's seen an increase in families drawn to the fractional ownership program, which has a price tag starting at \$250,000. Most customers, Costa said, are interested in weekend getaways.

"I think that people are looking at private yachting as a very interesting alternative in this environment," Costa said. "People are rethinking their vacation trips to Europe or having to travel long distances as it relates to getting on a plane."

Ports close, add restrictions

Most islands in the Caribbean, such as the Bahamas and the U.S. Virgin Islands have implemented restrictions similar to those in the Florida Keys, allowing few ships out and fewer in. Yachters have been left with two options: shelter-in-place until the waters open or retreat stateside.

The island clusters are gathering spots for a majority of superyachts outside the U.S. After seaports began closing in the Florida Keys in late March, many superyachts set sail toward islands in the Caribbean, which started closing soon after.

Bahamian Prime Minister Hubert Minnis sent [in warships from the Royal Bahamas Defense Force in early April](#) to prevent unauthorized ships from traveling the islands without written permission.

For Katie Gasper, 39, who has been living at sea for years with her husband and 11-year-old son aboard a 65-foot yacht, the crackdown meant staying put.

Gasper, a former physician assistant and current stay-at-yacht mom, and her family were in the U.S. Virgin Islands in mid-March, a day after the Islands confirmed its first coronavirus case. If it weren't for prior docking reservations, [the family wouldn't have been allowed in](#). The island's [shelter-in-place rules](#) are similar to those stateside: Nonessential businesses have temporarily closed, restaurants are limited to takeout and delivery, and gatherings of more than 10 people are prohibited.

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They're still allowed to travel on land throughout St. Thomas, but the limitations have started to bite at their day-to-day schedule. Since March, their typical day isn't that different than before the pandemic: biking, homeschooling, board games and yoga. Gasper said the most uncomfortable difference is the lack of human contact.

"We don't really hang out with people," Gasper said. "Drinking at sundown is a really big thing for sailors. We've done it only once in the past three or four weeks with friends of ours that are an older couple. We just sat 6 feet apart from each other on the dock getting drunk."

The Gaspers are staying put until further notice, postponing a loosely planned trip that would have taken them through the Panama Canal and toward Australia, where Gasper's husband dreamed of staying for a few months. She said the family feels safer docked in the islands than they would stateside, largely because of the distance between themselves and coronavirus hot spots.

The port they're docked in, Charlotte Amalie, had been crowded for weeks, Gasper said. But after the island's social distancing measures went into effect, the superyachts cleared out and headed for Florida's beaches, which [Gov. Ron DeSantis opened portions of two weeks later](#).

"It was kind of just like business as usual here," Gasper said. "A lot of the megayachts were coming and going and partying. Now many of the boats are returning to the U.S. prematurely. They're either sailing up there or being shipped on freighters up there. It's emptied out quite a bit."

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