



Sean Morgan takes a break on shore at Willamette Cove to prepare for guests. Behind him is his flotilla – the three boats he lives on.

PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Captain Morgan

Life on the Willamette River means navigating an unconventional free-floating society within a Superfund site

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Each day Sean Morgan wakes up just as the light of morning creeps into view – a habit he picked up from years of working as a concrete finisher. He turns on his stove, boils water in a teakettle and then pours it into a French press with three scoops of grounds. He sips his coffee while he listens to NPR's Morning Edition and makes a to-do list. After this ritual, however, Morgan's typical day ceases to bear any resemblance to ordinary. Because Morgan, partly out of necessity and partly for the sheer sake of adventure, lives on a makeshift island of boats in a secluded cove on the Willamette River.

Morgan, 48, has an amiable air about him. He gestures with his hands as he enthusiastically recounts his experiences on the Willamette and doesn't miss an opportunity to crack a witty joke. He looks like a man tempered by the elements – tall, tan and fit, with tousled curls and soft blue eyes that peer out from an ingenuous and weathered face.

Prior to 2012, Morgan had never set foot on a sailboat. But after reading "Sailing Fundamentals: The Official Learn-to-Sail Manual of the American Sailing Association and the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary," he purchased a 24-foot Buccaneer and took to the river. Life on land had become too much, and the idea of letting it all go was as much an adventurous impulse as it was a solution. After several bouts with homelessness in the late 2000s, Morgan was renting a one-bedroom apartment in downtown Portland for \$650 a month.

"I was sweating bullets trying to make rent every month," he remembers. After decades of manual labor, his back had given out and he was trying to get by selling computer parts and working odd jobs.

The idea of living on the river first presented itself to Morgan when he spotted

an old beat-up boat in a dilapidated back yard while in route to see a doctor for his herniated discs. He thought about offering to trade the yard's owner some labor on the property in exchange for the vessel. He couldn't find the location of the boat again after his appointment, but the idea stuck with him. Eventually, he landed a two-month gig and earned enough money to fund his move. He bought his first boat for \$900 and "set hook" in a marina by Hayden Island on the Columbia River.

Morgan didn't stay in the marina for long. After two months he had acquired two more boats: a 15-foot open-bow and a 22-foot motorless powerboat. In July 2012, Morgan took his maiden voyage down the Columbia toward Kelly Point and on to downtown Portland along the Willamette – with all three boats tied together. He didn't hoist his sails, but used a 10-horsepower engine to power his fleet. He remembers nearly colliding with a houseboat that day as residents inside looked on in awe with jaws dropped as he jumped onto their deck and diverted his boats by pushing the downed mast of the sailboat away from their plexiglass railing.

Morgan quickly fell in love with what he calls "the adventure" of living on the river.

"The first time I sailed was one of the most rewarding days of my life," says Morgan. Three months after the houseboat incident, he was traveling up the river to OMSI without enough gas to make it the 11 miles he had to travel to get there. "I think: I can do this. I shut off the motor, and as soon as I did I felt a calmness come over me because it was just the wind and the rushing current and the water making a splashing sound against the boats. I was going slowly with the wind – it was amazing – it works! I mean, they've been sailing for 10,000 years, but I haven't," he says.

The first dozen times he sailed, it was with all three boats secured together with diagonal tension lines. "They call me an admiral

because I'm in control of more than two boats," he jokes.

After moving between docks and inlets on the river for a while, Morgan set hook in a deceptively picturesque cove, where he's been living for the past year. Willamette Cove, just south of Cathedral Park, is easy to access by foot, bicycle and boat, provided signs warning of lead contamination don't turn you away. A closed, metal park gate covered in graffiti blocks cars from entering at the end of North Edgewater Street, and two small signs posted high up on an old utility pole to its left warn that the 27-acre natural area is closed due to contamination. Farther down the hill and over the railroad tracks, there are a series of trails winding through sparsely forested land that lead to the cove.

Surrounded by cottonwood, poplar and pine trees and lined with soft sand, the U-shaped inlet on the Willamette is serene and secluded. A few cement blocks dot the edge of the beach and wooden posts breach the water's surface, serving as reminders of the site's past.

Since the early 1900s, the cove has served as a location for a plywood mill, a barrel-making plant, a ship-building facility and a dry dock for ship maintenance. Years of industry left the area so contaminated with mercury, lead, PCBs and dioxin that it's been deemed by health authorities as unsafe for public use. While this all took place before environmental reporting requirements, it's believed that companies that operated there released chemicals into the water and on the shore. The last remaining buildings in the cove were demolished by the early 1980s.

Clean up efforts near the cove have included the removal of 127 tons of oil-ridden soil, and a portion of the beach itself has

Willamette Speaks
Storytelling events
are free to the
public.

Saturday, Sept. 20
Slabtown Festival
4 to 6 p.m. Sat.
McMenamin's Pool
& Tavern
1716 NW 23rd
Ave.

Sunday, Nov. 16
4-6 p.m.
Linnton Community
Center
10614 NW
St. Helens Rd.

Speakers will
include Sean
Morgan; Ray
Guimary, who
grew up playing on
log rafts in St.
Johns and worked
on the waterfront;
and a Native
American
storyteller.

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