

# flying high



story by John Janowiak photos by Steve Schulte

Whether cruising in his company jet or on one of his two Sea Rays, Dennis Hammond enjoys his journeys as much as his destinations



No matter what plane they're on—jet-setting around the country, cruising on their Sedan Bridge or snorkeling in the Cayman Islands—the Hammonds are always ready to take fun to a whole new altitude.

## Dennis Hammond is a chief executive on the go.

Get a hold of him any given time, and chances are he's zipping around the country on his company jet, traveling from his corporate headquarters in St. Louis to meet financial clients anywhere from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon. Reach him toward the weekend, and he might be heading to his second home in Fort Lauderdale. There he'll end up cruising around on another cherished vehicle, his Sea Ray 58 Sedan Bridge.

This particular Friday afternoon, Fort Lauderdale is exactly where Dennis is headed. "We're right over the Everglades," he says from the plane, a faint echo reverberating through the sat phone connection. "It's unbelievable to see houses down there in the middle of nothing. Folks have to get there with airboats."

Onboard the 10-seat Challenger 600 jet with him, besides a three-man crew, are Shelia—his wife of 34 years and an officer in the company—and Dan and Judy Mattison, some longtime friends from St. Louis. Over the weekend, they plan to ride the 58 down to Ocean Reef in Key Largo and up to Palm Beach.

Dennis is founder and CEO of Hammond Associates, a financial consulting firm that handles \$60 billion in assets for about 200 clients, many of them colleges, universities and foundations. He likes to visit all these clients as often as possible, dropping by whenever they need him, which explains the need for a corporate jet.

Running a company this size requires a high degree of personal drive, perhaps even a workaholic persona. Would Dennis agree? "I think we go in spurts. There are times we're working awful hard, and then there are times we play. And that's what the Sea Ray is all about." Make that Sea Rays, plural, as the Hammonds have a second Sea Ray—and a third home—down in the Cayman Islands.

One gets the impression Dennis doesn't like to sit still for long, even while unwinding on one of his boats. Looking back on life before his Sea Rays, he wonders what he did for recreation. "We just sat on the beach," he says in near disbelief. "You can imagine how difficult beach-sitting can be. It takes great training to do it right."

Although he's had the Fort Lauderdale home for 11 years, Dennis purchased his first boat less than two years ago. One day he and Shelia were driving by MarineMax of Pompano Beach, a Sea Ray dealer they had passed many times, and finally decided to stop in. "They had this beautiful 290 SLX; it was gorgeous, and we bought it," Dennis says.

They had a great time on it entertaining friends and clients from all over the country. And, lured by the boating possibilities, their adult sons were suddenly spending a lot more time with the folks. Alex (27) works for his dad's company, and Ted (24) is a film editor and a student at the University of Kansas.

The boat was such a hit that six months after buying it, Dennis decided to trade it in for a larger model to accommodate all his guests. He headed back to MarineMax where Tyler Hill, his favorite salesman, gave him a two-hour sea trial on a 58 Sedan Bridge. "It was a lot of fun," Dennis says. By the time they pulled up to



the dock, the 58 had worked its magic on him, and he bought it right then and there. Its purchase coincided with his 55th birthday, so he dubbed it the *Double Nickel*.

Dennis found that it provided all the room he needed, and then some. "The 58-foot Sedan Bridge is bigger than you think. I mean for entertaining, you can get people on the bow, you have people on the stern, you've got some people in the salon, and you can put people upstairs in the fly bridge. That's terrific." It's also big enough that he feels comfortable taking it across the Gulf Stream and over to the Bahamas, where the Hammonds and guests sometimes spend a night or two on the boat at Port Lucaya or the West End.

Dennis points out that Fort Lauderdale is roughly equidistant from Palm Beach to the north, Miami to the south and the Bahamas to the east. "That's why Fort Lauderdale is the yachting capital of the world," he says. "It's a terrific jumping-off place to do some good boating." The boat has given him a whole new appreciation of Fort Lauderdale and the surrounding area.

The Hammonds spend little time sitting on the beach these days. Every chance they get, they're boating to one destination or another. This weekend, after the Challenger 600 has landed safely and everyone has had a good night's sleep, they show up at the marina on Saturday afternoon. Captain Brian Clark of Pristine Marine has already gassed and prepped the boat, and they shove off after lunch.

Besides the Hammonds and the Mattisons, there are two more couples aboard today: Dick and Betty Anne Beaver, a retired couple who ran a chain of car dealerships in the Southwest; and Eddie and Jane Maruca from Pennsylvania. "Eddie's one of the only outside shareholders in my company, and just a great friend for the last 12 years or so," Dennis says.

From Pier 66 at Fort Lauderdale's Port Everglades, they cruise southward, down the Intracoastal Waterway, arriving in Key Largo in time for dinner at the Galley at Ocean Reef, where Dennis recently joined the yacht club. After a family-style meal, they hop back onboard for a beautiful cruise home. "Our friends just love getting out on the water, feeling the breeze and just watching the Miami skyline go by," Dennis says. "It's a lot of fun." They sip





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wine and mingle throughout the boat. The Hammonds, for the most part, perch themselves on the bow to take in the view.

Dennis and Shelia were high-school sweethearts in Kansas City, Kansas. Dennis’ family later moved to St. Louis, but the two were reunited when they attended the University of Kansas. They graduated within a semester of each other, got married, hopped into a U-Haul and drove to Philadelphia to attend Villanova University. “So, our first three years of marriage were spent in law school together,” Dennis says. After a couple years at a law firm, Dennis launched his company.

When they rode that U-Haul to law school, they surely couldn’t have imagined this life of travel and boating. Tonight, as the *Double Nickel* approaches Fort Lauderdale, it’s plain to see they’ve covered a lot of ground together. And a glance at their busy schedule shows they’ve got a lot of air and water to cover in the days, months and years ahead. That includes a trip down to the

Caymans, where the Hammonds keep their other Sea Ray, a 290 SLX named *Miss Shelia*. Dennis bought the boat at Harbor House Marina just six months after buying the 58, because he was so enamored with the 290 they’d owned in Fort Lauderdale and found the size to be just right for the Caymans.

“The boys love to go out and snorkel,” Shelia says. “We have a little scuba rig we use and we’ll go to Sting Ray City.” In the Caymans, the Sea Ray serves a practical purpose as well as a recreational one, Shelia adds. “We live in the north sound, and to get around you have to have a boat. Otherwise you end up spending an hour driving anywhere you go.”

Being on the go is something the Hammonds have definitely perfected. With a jet and two Sea Rays at their disposal, they always move in style. “The destination is almost not as important as getting there,” Dennis says. “It’s just a lot of fun to be on a boat, to really experience the ride.”