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Is it a boat? A car? Local Amphicar owners get two in one



Roger St. John drives his '63 Amphicar into Lake Tapps with his daughter Heather and wife Sonja. (Barry Gibbons / Special to NWautos)

What has a frog's face and a shark's body, and can move with ease across land and sea? It's the Amphicar — perhaps the best way to cruise on summer's more pleasant days.

The amphibious cars can accelerate to 70 mph on land, and then — surprise! — float at a jaunty 7 mph through water, powered by a four-cylinder Triumph Herald motor that produces 43 horsepower. Two propellers in the back are operated by a separate gearshift. In the water, the wheels function as rudders, while the steering wheel pilots the craft.



Nancy and Larry Solheim, of Shoreline, cruise in their Amphicar. (Courtesy of Jerry Sorensen)

"You have to have a flare gun, life preservers, fire extinguishers — same as if you're driving a boat," says longtime Amphicar owner Don Ross, of Mountlake Terrace. Like boats, they can leak. After a fateful swim in Sammamish Slough, Ross outfitted his car with an extra bilge pump to keep the water out. "It handles most of the leaks, but it isn't a foolproof thing; [water] still splashes in once in a while," he says.

With their classically cool 1960s fins and drop tops, Amphicars are much sexier than Ducks, the amphibious landing crafts that haul tourists around the city. The cars were exported to the U.S. from Germany between 1961 and 1968, with close to 4,000 produced.

More on Amphicars

- Amphicar.com, the official website of the International Amphicar Owners' Club, features historical information, a photo gallery, an events calendar and videos of Amphicars in action.

Washington state is home to a loose crew of about a dozen cruisin' captains who are game to show off their ships. Larry Solheim, of Shoreline, is the

webmaster of The International Amphicar Owners' Club, which connects enthusiasts around the world.

He and his wife, Nancy, have been driving and boating in their Amphicar since 1994. They get so much attention while traveling and towing it behind their motor home that they created informational cards to give to gawkers.

Roger St. John, of Pierce County, owns a Beach White 1963 Amphicar that he often takes to opening day of boating season. As Amphicars prowl through the Montlake Cut alongside sailboats and schooners, they offer the public a chance to see them in action.

St. John's daughter, Heather, has been piloting the car since her 13th birthday (she got her regular driver's license in July). She admits to a minor scrape during the boat parade one year. "I was going forward, and some other Amphicar was going backward," she says. That resulted in being escorted back to the dock by the Coast Guard.

"The thing that's so difficult is it has so many buttons on the dashboard, and none of them are labeled," she says. "You have to memorize which one is which and hope you got the right one. And you flip specific levers for the wheels or the propellers, and you have to make sure that's correct before going into the water. If you don't, you're really not going anywhere."

Last month, Ross took his Lagoon Blue 1964 Amphicar to the Mountlake Terrace car show, where he won first place in the "Most Unique" category. He recently made an apropos addition to the floating vehicle.

"I have a friend who owed me some money. He had two motorized surfboards, so I mounted them on top of my Amphicar," he says. "It looks a little unique."

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