

Island Coast for Sail

Schools help novices and old salts catch the wind

Essentially, a sail is nothing more than an airplane wing stood on end. Just as air rushing around the wing lifts an airplane, wind rushing around the curvature of a sail propels the boat it is attached to. That's about all the technical knowledge you need to learn to sail.

Maybe that's why hundreds of people every year learn to sail in courses offered along the coast of Southwest Florida. They come on vacation or they live nearby. They spend a day or two learning basic sailing techniques or they book a week or more on board to venture offshore with an instructor.

Local sailing schools range from the nation's largest, with headquarters in Ft. Myers, to a one-boat operation sailing out of 'Tween Waters Marina on Captiva. At least one of them also offers instruction in operating powerboats and all of them offer charters for experienced sailors.

People who have never sailed seem to have one of two reactions to it: They either can't understand why anyone would settle for plodding along at seven knots when they could power out at 30 knots. Or they look at sailboats as beautiful but always in danger of tipping over.

Sailboats do go much more slowly than powerboats. Still, few things are as exhilarating a ride as a hull thrusting through the water—minus the racket and fumes of a motor. And since you never run out of gas, you can go virtually anywhere for as long as you like.

As for the other concern, "heeling," as it is called, is how a sailboat maintains its stability. The air pressure pulling the sail is counter-balanced by the water pressing against the keel of the boat. The more keel there is, the steadier the ride. When the wind pipes up, the bow surges



PHOTO BY KELLY MADDEN

By William Ernest Waites

Southwest Florida has sailing schools to suit just about every level and desire. Capt. Chris Rogiers's Yachting Vacations offers standard courses as well as courses for couples who want to learn to sail together.



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Offshore Sailing School offers a wide range of courses and the basics of sailing, like pulling in a “man overboard,” as Matt Stewart demonstrates.

through the water and the stern leaves an effervescent trail in its wake. It's exciting but every bit as safe as any other boat.

Sailing schools show you how to manage the excitement and maximize your pleasure, while teaching you how to operate safely and follow the rules of the sea. Local schools belong either to the American Sailing Association or US Sailing, two groups that set standards for sailing instruction. They all offer courses ranging from basic Learn to Sail to Coastal Cruising.

The largest is Offshore Sailing School, which sails out of South Seas Resort at the tip of Captiva. The school was founded by two of sailing's most respected members, Steve and Doris Colgate.

Steve designed his own boat, especially for instruction, based on his years as an instructor and an Olympic sailor. The company has a fleet of twenty-four Colgate 26s, most of which are at South Seas or the Florida Keys in season.

In addition, Offshore has facilities in

the British Virgin Islands, Connecticut, the Florida Keys, Jacksonville and St. Petersburg, Florida, as well as Chicago, New York City, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. In addition to the standard courses, it also offers, in conjunction with the maker of North Sails, the only local performance/racing course. Offshore has courses for kids and teens and a “For Women Only” course.

Doris created the latter because men often are “too chivalrous,” she explains. “Men want to do things for women, thereby depriving the women of the hands-on experience of doing things they should do to learn.” Learning with peers gives women more confidence in their sailing skills, she says.

New Moon Sailing is on the other end of the size spectrum. Captain Mick Curley sails one boat, a Pearson 39 sloop, out of 'Tween Waters, also on Captiva. Curley will take you on board and teach you sailing from hoisting and trimming canvas to jibbing and coming about, depending on what you want to learn. “Everyone who charters my boat wants to learn,” he says, “so I'm teaching every time I go out.” Curley promises he will allow anyone who signs up for extended instruction to back out and cancel the balance of their fee if they decide they don't like sailing after the first day.

Incidentally, New Moon also hosts weddings on board, so anyone thinking of getting married in Southwest Florida can get hooked on sailing while they get hitched to each other.

Somewhere between these two companies is Sailboats Unlimited, whose home port is in Naples. Sailboats Unlimited offers all levels of ASA-certified instruction. Courses can be experienced one at a time or in combination for a memorable six-day onboard adventure. The school's fleet ranges from a 32-foot Pearson to a 45-foot Mariner.

Capt. Marlena Brackebusch, one of the company's instructors, describes their operation as focusing on bigger boats. “We get people who are planning to buy a boat or want to take their families with them,” she explains. “The most rewarding time is at the end of the course, when they have the opportunity to sail back to Naples on their own with nothing more than advice from their instructor, and they realize they can do it.”



Offshore Sailing School, which operates out of South Seas Resort on Captiva, is the largest school in the area. It has additional schools throughout the eastern United States, Chicago, and the British Virgin Islands.

Another mid-sized school offers powerboat instruction as well as sailing classes. It's Florida Sailing & Cruising School and it runs its sailing operations out of Burnt Store Marina at the southern reaches of Charlotte Harbor. This harbor is reputed to be one of the best sailing grounds in the world with more than 200 square miles of water sheltered from the gulf by barrier islands. FS&CS is an ASA Certification Facility that offers all ASA courses.

Owner Vic Hansen, also a captain, has a fleet of a dozen boats geared primarily to the person who wants an active, live-aboard learning experience. He also gets a lot of "transitional sailors" who have operated powerboats and want to learn to sail or vice versa. Hansen points out, however, that not everyone "should be allowed to play with boats....I had one man who was legally blind when he showed up for lessons. Another guy had lost his sense of balance. He had trouble standing up on dry land, let alone at sea. Obviously, these people were not qualified for certification."

Also sailing out of Burnt Store Marina is Yachting Vacations. Owner Capt. Chris

Rogiers says it offers all the standard courses as well as special courses for couples who want to learn to sail together. In addition to a fleet of Island Packet monohulls, Rogiers has the only fleet of catamarans available in Southwest Florida for instruction. Ranging from thirty-five feet to forty-three feet, catamarans (cats) are very popular with women sailors. Rogiers points out, "While cats adhere to the same basic sailing physics as monohulls, they do sail and perform a little differently. They don't tend to heel like monohulls do and therefore give a more comfortable ride."

He also promotes his operation as cruising-focused, so it concentrates mainly on live-aboard issues, such as electrical and electronic systems, how to anchor, how to dock, and so forth. He also believes one of his great assets is his proximity to Charlotte Harbor.

International Sailing School, an ASA school with headquarters at Fisherman's Village in Punta Gorda, is another company that benefits from convenient access to Charlotte Harbor. In fact, Josie Coulson, co-owner of ISS, says it was Charlotte Harbor that attracted her hus-

band and co-owner, CJ, to the area. He arrived on a sailing trip, discovered Charlotte Harbor, loved it, and decided to come back permanently.

According to Josie, ISS's Basic Coastal Cruising course is excellent for sailors with intermediate skills or for the "retired" sailor looking to return to the sea. "We feel it is important to learn what to do and how to do it properly, even if you have experience. My husband sailed for years without formal instruction. He decided to take the ASA courses and discovered there were things he had been doing wrong or not doing at all."

Now he instructs others, including those in their popular Private Couples Cruising course. The course is individually designed to meet the needs of a couple that is vacationing and wants privacy while they learn to sail. Very often, according to Josie, they buy their own boat and come back to live in this great sailing area. Just like CJ did. 🐦

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