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Big Dreams, Little Boats



What Women Want

BY NATALIE FRITON

Recently, I was invited to participate in a new course being offered by Sea Sense, the women's sailing and powerboating school. The organization has offered introductory and advanced sailing courses for 15 years and beginner powerboating courses just as long. Recently, however, it introduced an advanced powerboating course to expand on its experience-based training.

When *PMM* was invited to send someone to fill a last-minute vacancy, I jumped at the chance to experience the trawler lifestyle.

I have been sailing all my life but have no practical experience on a powerboat, particularly one capable of long-distance cruising. So, although I was not at all intimidated by the thought of spending a week on a trawler, I had no idea what to expect. I already had all the basic boating skills and knowledge of handling sails at sea, but my time at the helm of a twin-engine boat was zero.

The goal of Sea Sense's 7-day course is to enable students to operate a powerboat, rather than simply to serve as crew. The introductory course includes mostly in-depth instruction of basic boating skills, while this advanced, hands-on itinerary attempts to empower and build confidence by giving students a chance to actually run a boat while cruising.



George Seifried

ALL THINGS NEW

This second-ever advanced course took place in the San Juan Islands in the Pacific Northwest, with a starting point in Anacortes, Washington. Capt. Patti Moore and Assistant Instructor Patti Lanphear were our instructors aboard *Danny Boy*. It quickly developed that we addressed them as Patti M. and Patti L.

When we settled aboard the boat, an Island Gypsy 44, our group of women soon were laughing and relaxing in the crisp air of our Northwest setting. Mountains ringed our view, and a single seal frolicked in the marina. I had a good feeling about the upcoming week and was ready to see how our group dynamics would influence the week of cruising and overall learning experience.

The following day would begin our instruction... and our week of cruising.

DANNY BOY

As the purpose of the advanced course is to prepare someone to run a boat safely and successfully, the instructors at Sea Sense focus on cruise planning, what to check in the engine room and how to do so, basic navigation techniques, docking, and close-quarters maneuvering. This all takes place while cruising, which also means the



Photos by Natalie Fisher



students are cooking, cleaning, fishing and living all the other elements of life afloat. In the event of equipment problems, we might even have had an opportunity to learn how to deal with and troubleshoot a possible repair.

Day one began with an orientation tour of *Danny Boy*. The Island Gypsy was built in 1984, and owner



Left: A clear, calm day is the perfect time to practice boat handling and docking in a controlled setting; whether new to boating or a seasoned veteran, practice makes perfect. Right: Dropping anchor was a group effort: We approximated how many feet of line went out, used hand signals to communicate with the skipper and talked each other through attaching a snubber.



George Selfridge has kept the boat in immaculate condition. As we walked the perimeter of the boat and discussed its exterior features, I realized the course had officially begun.

In addition to the typical equipment found on any trawler, George outfitted his boat with significant safety equipment. He has easily accessible life jackets both on the flybridge and in the saloon; a man-overboard pole, liferaft and life rings (both starboard and port); and a large reel of polypropylene line at the transom for a stern tie to a tree when anchored close to shore during severe weather.

Danny Boy is also equipped with fun gear to take advantage of the many adventurous opportunities that the San Juan Islands have to offer, and during the next week we made great use of the kayaks and crab traps.

Our orientation included a discussion of fender placement, an examination of diesel fuel and water deck fills, and a mention of the importance of paying attention to what liquid goes where, as they are in close proximity. We inspected the shorepower cord and discussed the situations in which we would need the adapter for 50-amp service. Then we were introduced to the flybridge helm and engine control systems, the chart plotter, the VHF radio, and, of course, the beverage cooler.

Two women were assigned the aft stateroom with its island queen bed, and two of us shared the forward V-berth. One instructor would sleep in the saloon and the other in the single-bunk cabin amidships. The boat has two heads, a well-stocked galley and a very spacious, comfortable saloon. *Danny Boy* also has a large engine room, which

we would inspect each morning before getting under way.

We spent the rest of the morning taking turns at the helm practicing docking. With engine throttles at idle, the wheel centered, we learned to maneuver the boat using only the gearshifts. The universal quote of the week would be, "Neutral is your friend!"

Each of us had a turn at backing the boat out of its slip, steering to the center of the fairway, turning the boat in its own length, then returning to the slip. We practiced docking bow in as well as stern in. And we learned to do everything slowly, without hurry. Patti M.'s most frequent instruction was, "Stop the boat—think," before making a turn or other maneuver.

Of course we made mistakes, but being able to correct or overcome them gave us confidence in piloting the 37-ton trawler. I can think of only one word to describe my experience in docking, maneuvering and navigating this twin-engine trawler: empowering.

ANOTHER REFRESHER

We had all seen and used paper charts and electronics before, but never from a decision-making perspective. And as this course was not about sitting idly by and letting someone else make all the



decisions, Patti L. gave us the basics of creating waypoints and logging latitude and longitude, while Patti M. shared her local knowledge of the area to help us set realistic destinations.

They handed us charts, parallels, dividers and pencils, and we plotted away. There was no set itinerary; it was up to the students to decide where



Left: The engine room of *Danny Boy* was immaculate and user friendly and served as a great classroom for all things mechanical. Right: After spending so much time at the helm of *Danny Boy*, driving the dinghy was another story, and it's easy to forget how fast and responsive a smaller boat can be.

we would go. We took it one day at a time, sharing navigation and plotting duties. We often worked on course plotting in pairs, allowing each woman to participate, and we switched roles so that we all had equal experience plotting waypoints and determining compass headings. We chose routes that took us across shipping lanes and through remote channels, busy harbors, and passes with strong currents and tides—and we also tried to select routes that would maximize our chances of seeing whales.

MOUNTAINS, MASSAGES AND WATER TANKS

Our first leg across Rosario Strait was awesome in its beauty. Mt. Baker was snow-tipped in the background, and we could see currents swirling in the distance. It soon struck us that we were six women aboard a trawler, cruising our way to Rosario Resort on Orcas Island. The instructors had us run the boat in pairs so that one woman was responsible for navigating as the other drove the boat. We rotated every 5 to 7 miles or so, and each woman therefore got comfortable with each responsibility while under way. We repeated this throughout the week on each leg of the trip.

One of the students, Diane Simpson of Madera, California, was on the boat in order to prepare for

living aboard the custom-built steel trawler she and her husband owned. And it was no coincidence that she chose this particular course, as their main cruising grounds, once they moved the boat north, would be the Pacific Northwest.

For Maryellen Girardo of San Francisco, steering was a bit more challenging than for the rest of us. She



Photos by Natalie Frithon

had to make what we called a "transmission transition" because her 39-foot Californian has very touchy gears, and the throttle and gearshift are on one control. She had to train herself on the *Island Gypsy* not to grab the throttle when she wanted to shift gears.

Jackie Beard of Cedar Grove, New Jersey, had the most comparable helm experience, as she cruises on a 49-foot *Grand Banks* twin-engine boat with a wheel and separate throttle and gear controls similar to *Danny Boy's*.

Despite these differences in boats and levels of boating experience, it was very rewarding to be a part of a confident and self-motivated group of women.

By the time we reached Rosario, not even 20 miles from our starting point in Anacortes, the wind had picked up and our docking situation was more difficult than in our practice that morning. Patti M. took over the helm, and we learned how to handle a windy and narrow docking situation. Men on the sailboat next to our slip congratulated Patti on her amazing docking, and the rest of us, at the same time, thought, "Don't be so surprised, gentlemen!"

At Rosario, we stocked our cooler from the dockside grocery, enjoyed a delicious dinner at the resort and did a little shopping. Two of the ladies splurged on massages that left them smelling



delightfully of lavender for the next two days. Of course, we also tended to the needs of *Danny Boy*—emptied the trash and filled the water tanks.

INTO THE ENGINE ROOM

My experience at *PMM* and my extensive sailing background have given me experience with many aspects of boating, but I have never felt more enlightened than when I sat with Patti M. in the engine room of *Danny Boy* on the second day of the course. All of us were to share the task of daily engine room checks, and when Jackie and I stooped through the access into the engine room, I realized that my technical knowledge of an engine room was about to be jump-started big-time.

Patti M. had us check the four key systems: lubrication, cooling, electrical and fuel. Each of us checked the oil in the two 215hp Volvo diesels and the transmission fluid. We removed radiator caps and checked the engine coolant levels and the raw-water intake strainer. We pressed belts to check for proper depression. We also examined tank levels on sight tubes and the condition of the Racor 900 filters. The same checks were then made on the Northern Lights generator secured in its soundproof box.

I felt a strong sense of empowerment as Jackie and I wiped the oil off of dipsticks. We were there to learn—and if we got dirty in the process (which was nearly impossible in the spotless engine room), so be it.

Long after the engine room check was complete, I sat alone with Patti M. and asked question after question. She is a wealth of knowledge, and the engine room of *Danny Boy* proved a great classroom. I could have spent hours down there tracing pipes, tubes and wires, and I realized the other women would soon be doing just that aboard their own boats.

WILDLIFE AND BOAT HANDLING

En route to Echo Bay on Sucia Island, I screamed with delight when I spotted whales. Our instructors were more than happy to detour over for some

whale watching. Just off Clark Island, we sat at idle and watched three separate pods, four to six whales in each, play and broach close enough that we could hear them spout water from their blowholes. The scene was definitely an added perk not mentioned in the *Sea Sense* brochure!

When we finally pulled into Echo Bay, we practiced anchoring in the deep water, working together to set the right amount of anchor rode and attach a snubber in bridle fashion.

Once the anchor was set, I promptly set out in a kayak to drop a crab pot. Quite a few other boats occupied our anchorage, but all were pleasant neighbors. We also had a resident seal that never stopped entertaining. Our stay in Echo Bay netted six very large crabs; two got away, two were female, and Maryellen made a scrumptious crab dip out of the two that we cooked.

The next morning, we practiced picking up a mooring. We took turns approaching the mooring, using a boat hook to grab the chain and securing a line to the mooring itself. We also practiced pulling alongside a floating tie-up in the anchorage. Each woman found a different challenge in this drill, but we met those challenges head

on. After a successful touch-and-go, someone commented that it felt good not to get frustrated.

Throughout both exercises, we discussed various ways to communicate between the helmsperson and the person on deck. We agreed that old-fashioned hand signals will always work as long as they are obvious movements that each person understands. Communication is always a key factor in boating.

The two Pattis gradually gave fewer commands and said less, allowing the students to develop a high level of confidence and control. And by midweek, it was working.

TEAMWORK AND BONDING

Over the next several days, we visited Roche Harbor and Friday Harbor before returning to Anacortes. Each destination was different as to wind and weather conditions, so docking was never the same, and we gained more experience with each passing day.



Naralie Pihon

Above: Patti L. was a great teacher, always with a smile and always ready to lend a helping hand. Right: Crab success! We caught two large male crabs ready to be boiled and made into a tasty dip!



Patti Moore



We got comfortable with making decisions and handling the boat, and because we were living together, we also learned quite a bit about one another. Diane and her husband sold their Sun-Maid raisin vineyard to build a trawler and live out the dream. Jackie can make anyone smile, and we learned that she helps her partner, Rick, deliver his trawler south every winter and can navigate her way through the ICW. Maryellen is the proud owner and captain of her vessel, *Pate e Vino*, and is a die-hard 49ers fan with season tickets.

We also knew that Patti L. has a Pearson sailboat, *Sea Sense* (the former *Sea Sense* teaching boat), which was in her marina in Tampa Bay. When we got news of Hurricane Charley and its path of destruction, we pulled together as only women can. While time demanded we stay on schedule and keep going, our instructors were quite distracted with a need to take care of things back home.

Our confidence levels and newfound abilities were truly tested at this point. While Patti M. and Patti L. concentrated on making all arrangements necessary to keep things safe back home via cell phone, we students unplugged from shorepower, cast off dock lines and pulled away from the bulkhead as if we'd been doing it our whole lives. It wasn't until we were turned toward the open water that the two instructors even realized that we had pulled away from the dock! (Fortunately, Charley passed by Tampa Bay, but we certainly sympathized with those who were not so lucky.)

Our last day's run back to Anacortes included anchoring for lunch at Spencer's Spit and a mad

dash through the very narrow Lopez Pass. But we made it home to Anacortes in time for everyone's airport shuttle.

WHAT DO WOMEN WANT?

There is no doubt that the second-ever Advanced Powerboating Course was a success. Each of the women approached the week with different goals and desires, and all were accomplished. I got some time on a trawler and tasted the lifestyle. It feels good to me.

There is no doubt about it: Girls just wanna have fun. But having fun is only the beginning. When it comes to boating, we want it all. We will start from scratch to learn all there is to learn...and if we have to unlearn old techniques or open our minds to new ways of running dock lines, we will.

Sea Sense boating courses are just one avenue to take when the decision to learn is made. Boating is clearly more enjoyable when you are able to participate in all aspects of it. When it comes to running a trawler-style boat, checking the engine, docking, and other aspects of cruising, we need to *want* to be involved. Sometimes it might take a little encouragement and sometimes it

just might take time, but if we remind ourselves of the rewarding experience that is boating, we will always want to be involved.

We want to be able to communicate, to be able to give directions and take directions; we want nothing to be merely assumed. We can admit that we won't always get it right the first time, but we will keep trying and with practice we will improve.

We, too, want to live the dream. 



Nashie Frison

Kayaking one morning in Echo Bay led me to a spot that is a sandbar at low tide and a narrow shortcut at high tide.

A Few References To Start You Out

There are many styles of teaching that will enhance your boating skills. These are just a few of the many schools available to educate, train and empower you with the knowledge and experience to safely and confidently handle your boat.

Florida Sailing and Cruising School
Sea Sense
SeaSkills
Trawler School Charters

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