



Reaching into the Bitter End Yacht Club like we know what we're doing. Inset: Road Town, Tortola: Always remember the landmarks from where you started (top). The crew: Betsy, Muriel, Sally, and me

XX Games

TAKE HER SAILING AND SHE'LL GET A GREAT TAN;
TEACH HER TO SAIL AND THE OCEAN'S THE LIMIT
{BY REBECCA WATERS}

Betsy waves me over as I jump off the stern of *La Mouette*, our chartered Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 453, into the warm waters of Cooper Island's Manchioneel Bay. My mask and fins are already on. Betsy has found an octopus hiding against a rock shelf; it pulls an empty conch shell over itself when I get too close. I follow a couple of stingrays over to a reef where I spy a school of sergeant majors, Christmas tree worms of every color, and a variety of sea fans. The snorkeling is excellent, but I'm not here for the scenery. It's the second day of Sea Sense's week-long sailing course for women, and the British Virgin Islands, with its guaranteed February sunshine, steady 15-knot trade winds, and blissful 80-degree temperatures, is the perfect classroom.

I learned to sail over years of sailing with my dad and became reasonably good crew, but I wasn't comfortable being the skipper. When »



Betsy finally heeling and loving it



La Mouette: Our classroom for the week

it came to more-advanced techniques, like what we jokingly called the “ho-hum maneuver” (heaving-to), I just followed his instructions without understanding how it all came together. Naturally, I jumped at this opportunity to move beyond the basics. Admittedly, the location had something to do with it.

» **There are six of us** on *La Mouette*—four students with varied sailing experience and two instructors. Betsy, now a widow, sailed with her husband on Lake Erie, but is uncomfortable at the helm when the wind is blowing hard and the boat is well heeled. Sally, like me, is an experienced crew but rarely takes the helm on her and her husband’s boat. Muriel grew up power-boating, but, having met a sailor setting out on a singlehanded circumnavigation, wants to learn to sail so she can join him on the shorter legs.

Our instructors are Sea Sense founders Patti Moore and Carol Cuddyer. Carol grew up sailing. “When I was about six I sailed in a dinghy with my cousin,” she says. “Even though he delighted in telling me to duck *after* the tack, I figured it out and fell

totally in love with sailing. I taught myself to sail a Sunfish, took sailing courses in college, went offshore whenever possible, and delivered boats. I wanted to sail everywhere, and I still do. It’s a great way to see the world.”

Patti became a sailor as an adult, and it didn’t take long for her to get hooked. “I first sailed on Lake Lanier outside Atlanta, Georgia,” she says. “I loved it so much that I kept wanting to do more and eventually learn more and more about it. After getting my Coast Guard license many years later, I wanted to share what I had learned with other women and to help them learn from my mistakes. That sharing of knowledge of what I love is absolutely the most rewarding part of what I do.” Patti and Carol started Sea Sense in 1989 and now have seven instructors on staff. Their small school can’t afford the cost of ASA or US Sailing accreditation, but the large number of repeat customers speaks for itself (Sally and Muriel had taken Sea Sense courses before and Betsy has already been back).

“We’ve always been open to teaching the guys as well, particularly in couples courses or in our On Your Own Boat

courses, but our main focus has always been on teaching women,” they tell me. “We saw too many women who were just passengers on boats, and we knew that the real enjoyment came from participating. We also firmly believe that there should always be two people onboard capable of taking over in an emergency.”

» **Patti and Carol greet us** warmly when we arrive at the Sunsail base. After we choose cabins and take a quick safety tour of the boat, we jump right into the first job—leaving the dock. For some of us this is familiar; by starting at the very beginning of each task, though, Patti and Carol bring us all up to speed. Some of us are apprehensive at first, but we are all put at ease by our instructors’ calm voices and methodical teaching style.

We have chosen an all-women course to avoid the “Y-factor”—the assumption that orders must be barked, that we should learn our tasks by instinct, that yelling is a sign of camaraderie. We’re not looking for a trial-by-fire approach to sailing instruction. As Betsy later puts it, “This is the best way to learn. I was never embarrassed or intim-

PHOTO COURTESY OF SEA SENSE (LEFT); REBECCA WATERS (RIGHT)

idated, and I enjoyed the company of my shipmates. There are only calm voices and a small group of women who quickly become a team.”

“The biggest advantage of a women-only course,” Carol and Patti add, “is that all of us are about the same size and strength, and there’s no one onboard who will step in and do the work for us.”

Each day begins with a general discussion—navigation, marine radios, points of sail. Once we set sail, though, Patti and Carol focus on each of us individually. Their explanations make things click, and I finally see how and why the things I have always done actually work.

By the second day we’re already making progress. We haven’t become experts overnight, but we have gained enough confidence to volunteer for the maneuvers we previously felt least comfortable with. It’s all in the teaching method; we’re introduced to every step before we try it, then led through those steps as we execute them—no raised voices, tense moments, or fear of messing up.

» **One day as we prepare** for lunch, I have a revelation. I am at the helm, and with three easy steps that vague “ho-hum maneuver” becomes a solid heave-to. I finally understand the big picture. Other insights are less dramatic, but no less important. I learn how handle lines in ways that use the weight of my body rather than upper-body strength,



Girls have more fun (and we look good doing it). Inset: Captain Patti

which is usually less developed in women. I finally learn how to tie a bowline and a clove hitch, thanks to daily practice. And I learn how to inspect a diesel engine. Individually these are small feats, but they give me the confidence to take the next step. I now feel comfortable skippering a boat myself.

Muriel is also transformed. “I wanted to learn how to control a sailboat. I’ve been a powerboater for a long time and I’m comfortable with the water, but a large sail whipping around has always scared me to death,” she says. “By learning technique, I now feel I’m in control of the boat; I’m a beginner who knows what to expect, not

a nonsailor afraid of the unknown.”

Leaving Spanish Town, on Virgin Gorda, near the end of the course, Patti and Carol ask the same question that started the week: “What do we need to do to leave this dock?” This time we all start talking. Patti smiles and says, “Well, do it.” As we leave the marina and follow our course without instruction, we see how far we’ve come. Then Carol suddenly throws a milk bottle overboard and shouts, “Man overboard!”

“Your husband just fell overboard,” Patti says to Sally. “What do you do?”

“Call my lawyer and see how good his life insurance is?” she jokes. We begin our rescue mission.

Betsy, who has since taken a Sea Sense course in Italy, is making plans to charter a boat in December. “In my previous life,” she says, “I was the one in charge of cleaning the boat, cooking the meals, and raising the mainsail. I was seldom at the helm because I just wasn’t comfortable. Now I’ll happily share responsibility for sailing with the others. This is something I *never* would have done before I took this course.”

Sea Sense, www.seasenseboating.com, 800-332-1404. Visit the Web site for programs, places, and prices.



The Bight on Norman Island

PHOTO COURTESY OF SEA SENSE (TOP RIGHT); REBECCA WATERS (BOTTOM)