

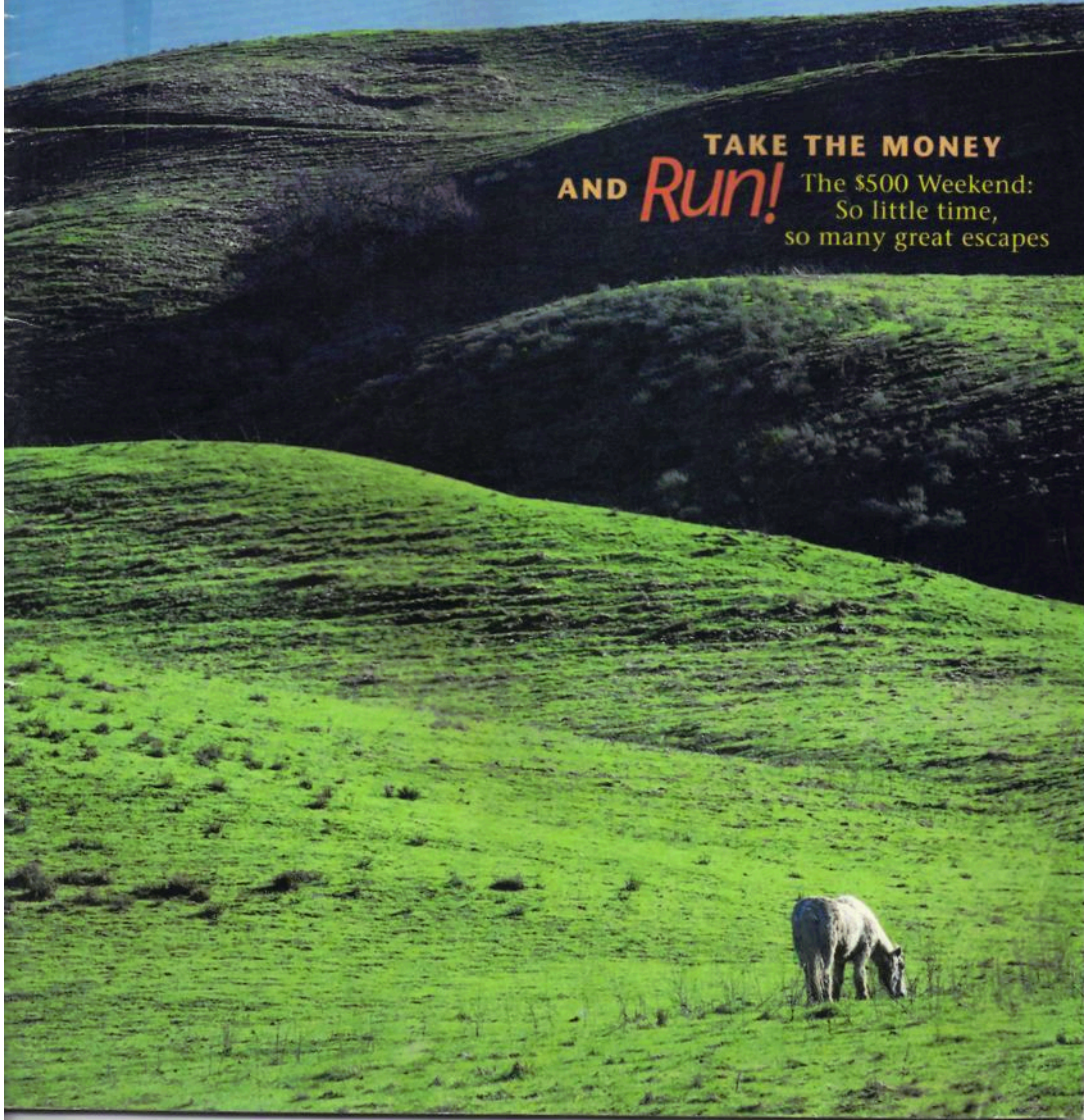
HIGH-SEAS SCHOOLING OFFERS NEW HOPE FOR THE NAUTICALLY IMPAIRED

# Westways

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The Magazine for Southern California

**TAKE THE MONEY**  
**AND Run!** The \$500 Weekend:  
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# JUST BREEZING ALONG

A COURSE IN SAILING COVERS WIND, WATER, AND OLD-TAR TERMINOLOGY.

**T**HERE'S AN OLD SALT'S adage that goes Red sky at night, sailor's delight.

Last night's sunset, however, was hot pink—which may explain why this October morning dawns amid gale warnings. A tropical storm heading northeast from the Sea of Cortez has agitated the air over Southern California—including Santa Barbara, where I've come to refresh my rusty sailing skills. Strong southerly winds are whipping around Point Conception—California's Cape Horn—and blustering through the Santa Barbara Channel.

The good news is that we're not going all the way out to the Channel Islands, where winds and waves peak in what mariners call Windy Alley.

The bad news is that we're going out.

## A Sailor's Life

It's the second Saturday of a two-weekend Basic Keelboat Sailing course offered by the Santa Barbara Sailing Center. With a fleet of 40 boats and a full range of American Sailing Association-approved instruction, the center is one of the largest sailing schools on the West Coast.

"We limit class size to four students or fewer, and we keep shore time to a minimum," says Lee Fleischer, director of the school. "The only way to learn to sail is in a boat, out on the water." I notice he's wearing different-colored socks. "Like running lights on a boat," he explains. "Green on the starboard side, red on the port side." When I ask if he has another pair like it at home, he just smiles.

The course is the introductory level of ASA certification, designed for landlubbers who don't know a head stay from a halyard, a cleat from a clew. (As the ASA manual, *Sailing Fundamentals*, explains early on, stays are wires that brace the mast, halyards are ropes used to hoist sails, cleats are fittings used to secure lines, and the clew is the bottom rear corner of a sail.)

I'm not totally clewless. I've sailed on lakes as a boy and

crewed on boats off both coasts. But that was years ago. Not long ago, I decided it was time to scrape the barnacles off what the manual refers to as my "skills afloat."

But why sail? There are certainly faster, surer ways of traveling over water. Why endure the vagaries of wind and wave, the fog bank of odd nautical terms and equipment? Well, first of all, there's the sheer poetry of bending the wind to your will, of using the breath of Mother Earth to journey on her watery three quarters. A boat under sail is an instrument played by air and water in motorless serenity. Molding the air and molded by it, sails under way possess an undeniable beauty.

Like old-tar terminology, they evoke a legacy of adventure—of explorers and buccaneers, naval heroes, and round-the-world solo sailors.

But stow the poetry. Think physics. Sails are simply curved airfoils, like vertical airplane wings that create forward pull instead of upward lift. A sailboat is a machine designed to harness the wind, and the sailor's job is to run it as efficiently as possible. That

task has gotten easier. Technological advances have produced computer-designed hulls, self-furling sails, and satellite navigation. Modern boats can sail at closer angles to the wind, with less drag and more speed than designs of old. Still, the essential techniques and equipment haven't changed for generations. An ancient mariner—if suddenly transported from the past—would have little difficulty recognizing the gear and the jargon.

## Captain's Log: Weekend One

The first weekend, our three-man class went over the basics, matching vocabulary to boat anatomy and applying our classroom learning to our boat, a Victory 21. In a light-to-moderate wind, we raised the mainsail and smaller foresail and maneuvered the boat out of the harbor. "There's a rhythm in sailing



ROMANCE AND HISTORY aside, a sailboat is simply a vessel designed to harness wind power. The sailor's job is to run the essential equipment as efficiently as possible.

JEFF BOOK



that comes with practice," said Ian Quinn, our instructor, an ex-Navy man for whom sailing is as natural as riding a bicycle.

With Ian's mock-gruff guidance, we'd put the 21-foot craft through its paces with growing ease. Our small class size gave everyone ample opportunity to serve as skipper as well as crew member. Taking turns at the tiller, we practiced tacking, or moving the bow of the boat across the eye, or current, of the wind in order to change direction. The procedure begins with the time-honored words *Ready about? . . . Hard alee!*

With this cry, the skipper pushes the tiller smartly away from the wind, turning the boat into and through the wind, which in turn swings the boom and the sails from one side of the boat to the other. This maneuver is called *coming about*. Its counterpart—moving the rear of the boat across the wind—is called *jibing*.

Jibing is the trickier of the two. Catching the wind from behind makes the boom swing faster and the sails harder to control (although it *does* give the skipper the chance to utter the vintage phrase *Jibe ho*). Soon we managed changes in direction with relative smoothness, remembering to duck as the boom swung across and scrambling to the opposite side of the boat to counterbalance the force of the wind.

After every change of tack, we trimmed the sails for each new direction. Because wind is a temperamental thing that can suddenly shift, gust, or ebb, sail position is a constant concern. We learned to read the wind in any number of ways: watching ripples on the water, yarn telltales attached to the rigging, a wind vane atop the mast, other sailboats, and, most of all, the sails themselves. When they flapped, we sheeted them in (sheets are the ropes used to trim sails) just enough to stop the flapping, or else we headed away from the wind until the sail was full again. Ian pointed out things we overlooked, quizzed us on our sailing knowledge, and occasionally dispensed anecdotes.

"I once taught an admiral's wife how to sail," he recalled ruefully. "Compared to that, you guys are easy."

### A High Wind to Graduation

On this, the second, windier weekend, we've switched to a J-24, a sleek 24-footer. Many of its fittings are labeled, which helps us follow Ian's instructions as we rig the boat. Ian mutters about the folly of taking a class out in a big blow but brightens once we're out of the harbor. Along the coast the wind isn't so fierce. "More sail!" proclaims our instructor. We raise the jib and are soon rocketing along.

"This is sailing!" enthuses Ian. "This is downtown without the pigeons." He's immediately soaked by a volley of sea spray, which the rest of us find hilarious.

Sailing upwind, we sit on the boat's high side in order to keep the mast as close to vertical as possible, following the maxim Flat is fast. The boat surges along, sails and stays thrumming. I'm learning to think of the mainsail as a tennis racket with an adjustable sweet spot. By changing the tension on the sail and the position of the mainsheet pulley, it's possible to alter the sail's shape and center of power in response to wind strength. Knowing how to fine-tune the sails to the wind is what separates the salts from the slugs.

On Sunday the wind moderates. As we sail, we discuss the sometimes confusing right-of-way rules. Boats under sail usually have the right of way over powerboats except in shipping lanes ("Tankers can't stop on a dime," observes Ian). We do man-overboard drills, rescuing a life jacket. We practice using the sails to stop the boat (*heaving to*); starting from a dead stop while headed directly into the wind (*getting out of irons*); and boat control in the harbor, which requires a lot of fast tacking. At the end of the final session, we take a written exam. All of us pass. Ian congratulates us and sees us off on the J-24 for three hours of sailing on our own. By now everything feels natural—we even execute a sharp man-overboard maneuver to rescue a prized baseball cap that blows into the drink. From offshore, Santa Barbara's mountain backdrop is sharply etched between sea and sky.

I'll need more knowledge and practice if I want to charter a large (30-

50-foot) boat or become a competitive sailor, but I know enough now to have a good time. It's not hard to get the hang of sailing. You don't have to be very fit, and you need to know only two knots. Unlike owning and operating your own yacht—which has been likened to standing under a cold shower while tearing up \$100 bills—sailing lessons and boat rentals are a reasonable alternative. Both are widely available at marinas from Santa Barbara to San Diego.

The Pacific is our front yard, and sailing is a wonderful way to experience it. Sailors elsewhere yearn for the mild temperatures, moderate seas, and steady winds usually found off Southern California. So leave smog and stress ashore, and get out there.

It's downtown. Without the pigeons. ■

## Sails off the Southland

**Santa Barbara Sailing Center** offers the Basic Keelboat Sailing course (\$259 per person for four hours of instruction on each of four days, plus three hours of sailing on the last day), as well as ASA courses in advanced cruising and navigation, instructional charters, and sailboat rentals. Contact Santa Barbara Sailing Center, the Breakwater, Santa Barbara, CA 93109; (800) 350-9090.

**Marina Sailing** maintains more than 80 sailboats in Marina del Rey, Long Beach, Oxnard, Redondo Beach, Newport Beach, and San Diego. Initial instruction (\$345) includes the ASA's Basic Keelboat and Coastal Cruising courses, plus Marina Sailing membership. Contact Marina Sailing, 476 Washington Blvd., Marina del Rey, CA 90292; (800) 262-7245.

**Harbor Sailboats** features a 35-boat fleet and a full range of ASA classes. The Basic Keelboat Sailing course (\$195, or \$295 including membership initiation) takes place on one weekend, eight hours each day. Rental rates for nonmembers start at \$90 per day. Contact Harbor Sailboats, 2040 Harbor Island Dr., Ste. 104, San Diego, CA 92101; (619) 291-9568.

**Dana Harbor Yacht Charters** runs a two-week, non-ASA introductory course (\$175) and rents to qualified sailors (rates start at \$150 per day for a 30-footer). Contact Dana Harbor Yacht Charters, 34571 Golden Lantern, Dana Point, CA 92629; (714) 493-1206.

For additional information, contact the American Sailing Association; (800) 877-7774, ext. 1512.

—J.B.