

NER



photo by: Rob Moore

It's a Sunday morning in May, about 7:30. It's raining heavily, and the wind is whipping up waves, whitecaps and spray on the Bay. Normally, I would be out for a bike ride or a hike on a Sunday but not in this weather. Instead, I am heading to the Marina to continue my sailing lessons at the Olympic Circle Sailing Club (OCSC) in Berkeley. As I pull into the club's parking lot, the sky is gray, and you can hear the wind howling through the masts and lines of the nearby sailboats. Inside, I am warmly greeted by Anthony Sandberg and his staff.

"We sail everyday," Sandberg says as we discuss the morning's conditions. "The great thing about learning to sail on the San Francisco Bay is the variety of challenging conditions that are presented to you— sometimes all in a single day."

Certainly challenging today, I think to myself. However, the motto at OCSC, "Sail with Confidence" is what has brought me back out here in the first place anyway. Damn the conditions.

Sandberg founded OCSC in 1979 as a one-man sailing school using a borrowed boat, a telephone and living out of his van.

"It was great," he says with a smile. "I would leave before any customers arrived and then would drive back in so it appeared that I was coming from somewhere else."

In 1981, Sandberg moved the school from an Oakland estuary to its present site at Berkeley Marina, on land that was once part of the municipal dump. Today, his 10,000-square-foot facility is the largest single-location educational sailing institution in the country.

The growth is not accidental. Sandberg's mission with OCSC has always been to make sailing available, affordable and approachable to anyone with the desire to learn and participate. He acknowledges this inapproachability, but his business model of being a club is changing that notion.

Upon joining, members of OCSC pay an initiation fee and monthly dues. They are entitled to take a variety of classes, charter boats from the fleet and join in on flotilla vacations and adventure vacations around the world.

"Think about it: You never see an empty marina, not here in the Bay Area or anywhere," says Sandberg. "Most people get into sailing without the proper skills; they buy a boat and don't know what they are doing, so the boat sits there waiting to be sold to someone else who thinks it looks neat. With OCSC, after a few lessons, you have as much knowledge about sailing as half of the people on the Bay. We make it easy for people to get out and go sailing without all of the maintenance, storage and other needs that arise from sailboat ownership. You can charter a boat from us for a weekend day and take out friends for less than it costs to go bowling."

Makes sense, I'm thinking. It reminds me of a saying that was related to me recently: The happiest two days of a man's life are the day he buys a boat and the day he sells it.

But back to my lessons. Today, I am heading out on a J24, the most common teaching boat in OCSC's fleet of 48 boats. Along with my fellow classmates Rita and Mark, we rig the boat and are later joined by our instructor, Cameron, who checks our rigging before setting out. All of us don the provided foul-weather gear.

All sailing classes at OCSC maintain a three to one student to teacher ratio, the smallest in the industry. Needless to say, we all get a good deal of hands-on experience.

We take turns tacking, gybing, heading up and bearing away. We're getting wet from the rain and the spray but loving it. San Francisco is a completely different place when viewed from the Bay.

After several hours, we head back to the clubhouse for lunch and discuss the morning's activities. Then it's back on the water. Joining us for this session is Bob, a

large juice bottle with a rope attached.

"Man overboard!" Cameron shouts as he tosses Bob into the surf. Bear away, tack, blow the jib. It takes some time, but we all manage to get Bob back in the boat. This goes on for the rest of the afternoon, and it is a gas!

One of the great benefits of learning at OCSC is the guarantee: If you are not ready to continue to the next level, they let you come back until you are ready to move on.

I'm learning that everyone has a different goal when getting into sailing. For some it's racing; others it's cruising. And for many Bay-Area residents, it's just getting outside on a bay that seems so inaccessible but in reality is not. For me, the allure is (after just a couple of lessons) having the ability to go almost anywhere in the world and charter a boat for a week of sailing between islands or beaches.

"After sailing on a day like today," Sandberg says, "Think about what it will be like when it's 80 degrees and a mellow wind is blowing you along to a tropical paradise." Sounds good to me.

Also, the club always has events going on in which you can join other sailors as crew or captain for a day or weekend. They also plan and organize trips all over the world. This summer there are flotillas to Turkey, Greece and the Windward Islands. If not abroad, there is something going on at the club, such as local trips or day sails with barbecues and beer afterwards.

I may not be going to Greece this year, but the feeling of accomplishment comes to my mind every time I look out on the Bay and see a sailboat. Once a different world that seemed so far away, is now so accessible.

For more information about the Olympic Circle Sailing Club in Berkeley, go to www.ocscsailing.com.

SAIL ON, SAILOR

By Paul Oelerich